Embodiment and the Other:
Relationships and Alterity in Phenomenology and Deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida

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Declaration:

This thesis is entirely my original work, except where noted in the main body of this text.

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Thesis Abstract

Embodiment and the Other: Relationships and Alterity in Phenomenology and Deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida

While there have been many essays devoted to considering the relationship between Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida, there has been virtually no sustained book-length treatment of these two French philosophers. Moreover, much of the literature that does exist presupposes an oppositional relationship between them, and between phenomenology and deconstruction more generally. In order to more systematically examine their relationship, this thesis is orientated around an analysis of each philosopher in terms of two important and related issues – embodiment and alterity. Agreeing with Merleau-Ponty's enduring insight that conceptions of embodiment and alterity are intimately linked, an effort will be made to consider each of them in relation to areas with which they are not commonly associated – eg. Derrida on the body, and Merleau-Ponty on alterity – in order to discover what insights considering them together might have. Such a methodology illustrates the complexity of their relationship, in that both philosophers make important contributions in regard to either issue. However, as well as suggesting that their relationship cannot be adequately characterised in a strictly oppositional way (eg. phenomenologist versus post-structuralist), it will also be argued that there are some important differences between their respective approaches that are structurally contiguous whether contemplating embodiment or alterity.

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon our embodied situation engenders a chiasmic conception of alterity in which self and other are inevitably intertwined together. One implication of his ontology is that questions regarding the otherness of the other risk being an abstraction that does not actually do justice to alterity. On the other hand, while Derrida's philosophy is not a linguistic idealism that prohibits recourse to questions concerning embodiment, it only infrequently actually contemplates embodiment, and it will be argued that it is no coincidence that his conception of alterity is also not obviously chiasmic. That their concerns are importantly different may seem axiomatic, but after arguing that Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity does not succumb to the "imperialism of the same" that Lévinas has associated with phenomenology, this thesis will contend that responsibility towards alterity might be more productively conceived of as an imperative to transform the notions of self and other, rather than as the valorisation of

that which resists such a transformation. While Derrida at times makes similar claims, and certainly points towards the dual necessity of both of these ideas in his descriptions of the messianic and the wholly other, it will be argued that he ultimately conceives of responsibility primarily in terms of the aspects of the other that resist transformative interaction. In this respect, an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's work provides the resources for engaging in a critique of Derrida for downplaying the more relational conception of alterity that is induced by a recognition of our embodied situation. The deconstructive insistence that writing is in and of the world necessitates that it must also encounter a phenomenology that is intertwined with the world. This thesis hence proposes the possibility of a Merleau-Ponty inspired philosophy that does not so avowedly seek to extricate itself from phenomenology, but that also cannot easily be dismissed as simply another instantiation of the metaphysics of presence.

To summarise, this comparative juxtaposition of these two thinkers on the themes of embodiment and alterity intends to accomplish several things:

1. It will argue that Derrida's criticisms of phenomenology, particularly in regard to it being a metaphysics of presence, need not apply to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. 2. It will argue that Derrida's conception of alterity in his later philosophy cannot extricate itself from phenomenological concerns quite as easily as he sometimes seems to believe.

3. It will highlight that Derrida's descriptions of responsibility towards alterity are not the only way left for a non-metaphysical philosophy, and that there are some salient ethico-political reasons for choosing a Merleau-Ponty inspired alternative that accords due attention to our embodied situation.

1. Embodiment and the Other: Relationships and Alterity in Phenomenology and Deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

It seems difficult to deny that philosophy is currently in the midst of a tumultuous becoming into something other than what it has been. At the very least, the possibility of such a change has been widely promulgated in the mid-late twentieth century. In one of his last lectures, Ludwig Wittgenstein explicitly suggested that philosophy had become a "new subject", and he also insisted that modern culture was on the verge of undergoing a "kink in the development of human thought comparable to that which occurred when Galileo and his contemporaries invented dynamics"[1]. In an essay aptly titled "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking", Martin Heidegger argued that philosophy had reached its end, but he nevertheless concluded that "thinking is not also at its end, but in transition to another beginning"[2]. More recently, Richard Rorty has echoed these type of sentiments; whereas once the dominant philosophical move was to suggest "this is how philosophy has been; let philosophy henceforth be like this", he claims that the typical question has now become "given that this is how philosophy has been, what, if anything, can philosophy now be?"[3]. Certainly, many of the twentieth century's most influential philosophers have undertaken the search for alternative ways of thinking, free of the dichotomistic problems and confusions that have plagued our metaphysical and rationalising thought (of myriad possibilities consider: determinism/indeterminism, subject/object and, more importantly for this thesis, mind/body and self/other). Suffice to say that all of us recognise the type of argument that disparagingly traces the lineage of Western thought to Parmenides, Plato, Cartesian doubt, or even Kant's famous enlightenment dictum, to take merely a few of the most prominent claims. Whether it is referred to as the empirico-transcendental doublet, logocentric, onto-theological, or metaphysical, Western philosophy has been, and is being, roundly chastised. Although this summary of the tradition elides major differences, there are certainly some truths to it. While not wanting to subscribe to a blanket rule, one can admit of a predisposition, or a 'family resemblance' as Wittgenstein would have it, that is distinguishable among the

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[1]Wittgenstein, L., as cited in Martin, G., *From Nietzsche to Wittgenstein: The Problem of Truth and Nihilism in the Modern World*, New York: Peter Lang, 1989, p 247–8.
[2]Heidegger, M., *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Stambaugh, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p 96.
[3]Rorty, R., "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey" in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Murray, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978, p 243.

various different guises of the Western history of philosophy.

In twentieth century French philosophy, this denigration of the tradition has also become somewhat accentuated[4], and two of the leading alternative approaches have been phenomenology and deconstruction, even if these are, of course, vastly diffuse bodies of thought. While phenomenology, at least in its original Husserlian form, arguably became an idealism by explicitly bracketing away the question of the outside world, several major French philosophers have sought to enrich Husserl's thought in such a way as to problematise any reduction to the things as they appear to consciousness. In particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida are two philosophers who, while indebted to the work of Husserl, have nevertheless sought to go beyond him, and have paid close attention to the hierarchical and dualistic logic that they contend governs Western philosophy in all of its various forms.

While remaining roughly within the purview of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty has emphasised the way in which our embodied situation actually precludes any simple, dualistic account of perception, habitual activity, etc. For him, neither empiricism nor what he terms 'intellectualism' (ie. rationalism) has provided a coherent account of our embodied, perceptual life, and he has sought to rectify this situation, while also highlighting the impossibility of enacting any satisfactory reduction to the things themselves.

Derrida, on the other hand, has been the instigating and major representative behind what has come to be called deconstruction. He began his philosophical career attempting to distinguish himself from phenomenology through notions such as the trace and *différance*, which are precisely about that which does not appear to consciousness. Deconstruction considers the phenomenological method to be inadequate, and still susceptible to many of the problems that have afflicted Western philosophy. Indeed, despite Derrida's strategic disavowals to the contrary, there is a sense in which deconstruction considers itself to be post-phenomenological, and as will become apparent, this is even more true of secondary proponents of deconstruction.

The initial and most obvious point of inquiry of this thesis will be to focus upon the ways in which the thoughts of these two French philosophers actually intersect. Both

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[4]While it can be claimed that twentieth century French philosophy has helped to engender an antagonistic relationship with traditional Western philosophy (primarily through the agency of 'postmodernism' and post-structuralism respectively), it also needs to be recognised that this tendency is frequently accompanied by a retrieval of certain thinkers from that tradition, perhaps most notably Nietzsche and Spinoza.

philosophers have an enduring unease with the tradition's exaltation of the reflective above and beyond all else, but for several different reasons Merleau-Ponty and Derrida have rarely, if ever, been systematically considered at length together. The fact that Derrida has almost never mentioned Merleau-Ponty prior to 1990 is one important factor in this scarcity of prolonged comparative accounts (ie. of more than a chapter in length)[5]. Given Derrida's latent phenomenological heritage and his enduring fascination with Husserl, this is an interesting omission, although it is one that has been partially rectified by his 1991 text, *Memoirs of the Blind*, which considers Merleau-Ponty at some length (see chapter five).

Another reason why there has been no detailed exploration of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida is because of the prevalence of a certain meta-historicisation of philosophy, which inevitably legitimises certain questions while at the same time excluding others, particularly if those questions pertain to previous traditions (in this case phenomenology) that fall within the scope of derogatory terms like logocentric, metaphysical, and onto-theological. I do not think that this is Derrida or Heidegger's fault in particular, even though the early stages of both of their careers were very much focused upon the philosophical tradition *per se*, but this type of preoccupation can be partly explained by the privileged position that certain 'postmodern' ideas have attained in contemporary European thought. No longer a ladder to be used and thrown away, as in Wittgenstein's elliptical conclusion to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*[6], a certain postmodern ladder is carried around, resulting in received ideas being circulated without analysis (eg. Western philosophy is logocentric) and every conceivable problem being blamed on the metaphysical, system-building impulse (difference is paradoxically eschewed by that which intends to reify difference).

To some extent this is inevitable, but this thesis will take issue with one aspect of this oppositional disposition, that being the way in which traditions as intertwined as phenomenology and deconstruction are often precluded from any meaningful interaction,

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[5]In his essay "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida devotes half a paragraph to the work of Merleau-Ponty (WD 104), and there are also isolated comments about his French predecessor in other texts of his (cf. WD 11), but there has been nothing of sustained significance until *Memoirs of the Blind*. Derrida's recently published text, *Le Toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), also accords the work of Merleau-Ponty some brief attention.

[6]Wittgenstein famously concludes his book by stating that "he who understands me finally recognises them (my propositions) as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it)... Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent". See Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Ogden, London: Routledge, 1996,

or more accurately, their interaction can take place only along certain carefully delineated lines. If Derrida suggests that his concerns are antithetical to those of phenomenology, and in places he does imply this, then a certain model of academic criticism accepts that this is the case and other questions are correlatively ignored, the question of embodiment being merely one of the most obvious. This preoccupation with the history of philosophy (which need not be explicit) almost inevitably insists that phenomenology is but the last gasp of metaphysics, and there is a resulting tendency to maintain that the relationship between deconstruction and phenomenology is typified by disparate and entirely distinct concerns. This is one formulation that this thesis will seek to transgress, particularly in relation to the respective thoughts of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

Indeed, while these thinkers have had no full-length books devoted to considering their relationship, there is a growing number of chapter-length essays, as well as collections of essays. However, much of this literature also posits a vast difference between them. Where a comparative account is called for, many phenomenologists valorise Merleau-Ponty over what they denigrate as the linguistically inclined Derrida[7]. Those proposing this interpretation of Derrida tend to envisage a textualising of the notion of the body that precludes it being considered in any manner other than linguistic. On the other hand, many deconstructionists refuse to engage seriously with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, who is variously construed as a metaphysician of presence, or a foundationalist[8]. The things that Merleau-Ponty is accused of lacking are often those that Derrida is, by contrast, said to possess, and vice versa.

More specifically, in the collection of essays entitled *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*[9], and to a lesser extent, *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*[10], the shared presupposition seems to be that

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proposition 6.54.

[7]This claim is justified in chapter three, where I discuss the rather frequent accusations of semiological reductionism that phenomenologists bestow upon the work of Derrida.

[8]Rather than condemning the work of Merleau-Ponty, deconstructionists usually just ignore it. There are, however, some notable exceptions, including Rodolphe Gasché, whose essay "Deconstruction as Criticism" acknowledges Merleau-Ponty as an important forerunner to deconstruction (see Gasché, R., *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994, p 29–30). David Farrell Krell's recent book also considers Merleau-Ponty at some length (see Krell, D., *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Art, Affirmation and Mourning in the Thought of Jacques Derrida*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000).

[9]Dillon, M., ed. *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997.

[10]Busch, T., & Gallagher, S., eds. *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Derrida and Merleau-Ponty are highly different, and even paradigmatically opposed. To summarise the otherwise multifarious and interesting literature, even the collection that has been written precisely in order to examine the relation of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophical notion of *écart* (divergence) to Derridean *différance* quite vehemently ends up collectively asserting a disanalogy. Of course, it cannot be denied that there are many significant points of discord between these two philosophers, but contesting many of the oppositional presuppositions brought to bear upon the essays contained in these two volumes, as well as in many other texts, will be an enduring concern of this thesis.

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida actually exhibit some curiously similar philosophical strategies in several important respects. Foremost amongst these similarities are aspects of their critique of the philosophy of reflection, as well as their espoused methodology for a 'philosophy' that might avoid the oppositional and dualistic hierarchies that they associate with it. Merleau-Ponty's notion of a "hyper-reflection" even pre-empts Derridean deconstruction in some important ways, in that both strategies point towards the necessity of a philosophical proposition containing contrary elements within it (and do not seek an ultimate synthesis of these differences), and both also insist upon the impossibility of recapturing what might be termed the pre-reflective faith. Now, to persist with this type of comparative methodology risks effacing some of the considerable differences between the writings of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, as well as unjustifiably problematising the respective identities of phenomenology and post-structuralism. However, it will be argued that the risk of this interpretive violence can not only be minimised, but is also worth taking, if their relationship is examined systematically in terms of two important and related thematic concerns – embodiment and alterity.

Agreeing with Merleau-Ponty's enduring insight that conceptions of embodiment and alterity are intimately linked, this thesis will consider each philosopher in relation to areas with which they are not commonly associated – eg. Derrida on the body and Merleau-Ponty on alterity – in order to discover what insights considering them together might have. Such a methodology illustrates the complexity of their relationship, in that both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida make important contributions in regard to either issue. However, as well as suggesting that their relationship cannot be adequately characterised in a strictly oppositional way (eg. phenomenologist versus post-structuralist), it will also be argued that there are some important differences between their respective approaches that are structurally contiguous whether contemplating embodiment or alterity. Rather

than existing in an antagonistic opposition, however, these thinkers' differences can serve to supplement and enrich each other.

In this respect, the more critical intention of this thesis will be to argue that Merleau-Ponty raises some important issues that are commonly ignored by deconstruction (the reverse also applies, but establishing that will not be a priority). Without resorting to a simplistic good/bad characterisation of these philosophers, one of the major arguments of the first half of this thesis is that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon an embodied engagement in the world provides the tools to undertake a more critical examination of the 'undecidability' that Derrida argues is involved in all decision-making. More specifically, it will be argued that due recognition of our habitual and embodied acquisition of skills is capable of reducing the aporetic difference between what precedes a decision and the instantiation of the decision itself. As will become apparent, this difference is an important aspect of Derrida's insistence upon the necessary "madness" involved in all decision-making.

More generally, however, the first half of this thesis will argue that although Derrida is not a semiological reductionist, and although there is no *a priori* reason why deconstruction should not have considered embodiment more than it has thus far, his account of embodiment is nevertheless lacking in some important respects. It will eventually be suggested that this has some important consequences for his position in regard to the alterity of the other, and how it might be best respected, which will be the guiding concern of the second half of this thesis.

Before summarising the argument in that respect, some explanation is necessary about why embodiment and alterity are significant issues beyond being helpful comparative tools which highlight that Merleau-Ponty and Derrida share a deep discontent with traditional philosophy (in the varying ways they conceive of it) and an all-pervasive doubt regarding reason's ability to tell us how to relate to the other. The main point to establish is that they are both repelled ethically, as much as philosophically, by the tradition that has preceded them, and while it is not in the exploration of the ethical that the majority of this thesis will reside, it is in the domain of ethics that it hopes to have at least some of its import. Derrida has spent a lot of time interrogating what responsibility to the other might consist in, and he has repeatedly insisted that in the absence of some omniscient reason (ie. God, or the rational subject) capable of determining right from wrong in a simple and non-contingent way, ethical accounts of

our relations with others can no longer focus upon providing Kantian or utilitarian-inclined prescriptions on how we should relate to the other. While there are those who would dispute Derrida on such a point, I am in agreement with him to a significant extent.

Now, there are some important differences between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty's respective accounts of responsibility towards alterity, but it is worth comparing the two positions, particularly given the rather pervasive acceptance of the Derridean position within certain schools of thought. Indeed, it will be argued that in various different texts, Derrida privileges a conception of responsibility towards alterity that involves respecting the aspects of the other that resist being known, and that resist being transformed or altered through interaction with the self, or subject, who is attempting to be responsible towards the other. While his Lévinasian-inspired efforts to establish an alterity that cannot be reduced to a dialectic are an invaluable contribution to the philosophical tradition, it will be argued that his position at times goes a little too far and verges on becoming an 'agnosticism' in regard to the other (even when that alterity is envisaged as actually 'within' the self). Bereft of a *sustained* account of embodiment, Derrida inclines rather exclusively towards conceiving of responsibility along the lines of respecting the aspects of the other that are forever elusive, and this claim will be legitimised via an examination of several of his 'possible-impossible' aporias.

However, Merleau-Ponty's embodied focus provides the resources for a different account of what responsibility to the other might consist in. His emphasis upon our embodied situation engenders a chiasmic conception of alterity, in which self and other are inevitably intertwined within one another, although never simply reducible to each other. One implication of Merleau-Ponty's ontology is that questions regarding the 'otherness of the other' risk being abstractions that do not actually do justice to alterity. On the other hand, Derrida only infrequently contemplates embodiment and his conception of alterity, particularly in his recent work, cannot be characterised as chiasmic in the way that this can be said of Merleau-Ponty. That their concerns are importantly different may seem axiomatic, but after arguing that Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity does not succumb to the "imperialism of the same" that Lévinas has associated with phenomenology, this thesis will contend that responsibility towards alterity might be more productively conceived of as an imperative to transform the notions of self and other, rather than as the valorisation of that which resists such a transformation. While

Derrida at times makes similar claims, and certainly points towards the dual necessity of both of these ideas in his descriptions of the messianic and the wholly other (*tout autre*), it will be argued that an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's work provides the resources for engaging in a critique of Derrida for downplaying the more relational conception of alterity that is induced by a recognition of our embodied situation. The deconstructive insistence that writing is in and of the world, necessitates that it must also encounter a phenomenology that is intertwined with the world, and this thesis hence proposes the possibility of a Merleau-Ponty inspired philosophy that does not so avowedly seek to extricate itself from phenomenology, but that also cannot easily be dismissed as simply another instantiation of the metaphysics of presence.

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2. It will argue that Derrida's conception of alterity in his later philosophy cannot extricate itself from phenomenological concerns quite as easily as he sometimes seems to believe.

3. It will highlight that Derrida's descriptions of responsibility towards alterity are not the only way left for a non-metaphysical philosophy, and that there are some salient political and ethical reasons for choosing a Merleau-Ponty inspired alternative that accords due attention to our embodied situation.

If this summary seems to reinstate an oppositional logic between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, this is partly due to the 'nature' of an introduction[11]. In the main body of this text, it should become clear that rather than Merleau-Ponty simply being correct at the expense of Derrida, a more sophisticated thinking regarding both embodiment and alterity needs to be able to conceive of a relationship between their somewhat different concerns that is not one of exclusion. Doing away with such oppositional tendencies

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[11] According to Hegel, it is inappropriate to offer the prospective reader reflections on a work that he or she has not yet read. He also argues that it is impossible to summarise a philosophical work that is, if of any merit, always inseparable from its detailed textual development (Hegel, G., *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p 1). Of course, an introduction is also a necessary and unavoidable 'evil', and one that we might, in the spirit of Derridean deconstruction, suggest always already inhabits and corrupts the purity that philosophy seeks by revealing it as inherently textual (cf. D 9–20).

promises to reawaken us to those more institutive and emancipatory aspects of philosophy (eg. "philosophy as a power and adventure of the question itself"[12]) that have become partly obscured by the intricate systems of oppositions and exclusionary tactics that the focus upon narrative stories regarding the history of philosophy has induced. This thesis hence hopes to enable a discussion that will move beyond a mere comparative account of two important theorists, and into an analysis of embodiment, alterity, and how we are best to conceive of their inter-relation; a project that promises to be of mutual benefit to both phenomenologists and deconstructionists alike.

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[12]Derrida, J., as cited in Patrick, M., *Derrida, Responsibility and Politics*, Ashgate Publishing, Avebury Series in Philosophy, Aldershot, 1997, p 5.

PART 1: EMBODIMENT

Chapter 2: Merleau-Ponty, the Body-Subject, and the Disciplining of Reflection

Focusing on *Phenomenology of Perception*, this chapter introduces Merleau-Ponty's lifelong project of seeking to avoid traditional philosophical dichotomies, which he represents as intellectualism and empiricism. This background is important, not least because it will allow a direct comparison with Derrida's strategies in regard to oppositions, but also because the embodied focus that Merleau-Ponty presents in this text is retained throughout his career. It will be argued that his concern with embodiment is an important factor in his conception of responsibility towards alterity that will, to some extent, be privileged in the latter half of this thesis. This chapter will hence involve consideration of the mind-body dualism that his notion of the body-subject attempts to overcome, as well as a discussion of other important themes of his text, including perception, the habitual activity of the body-subject, and the ambiguity that he has insisted is a necessary component of our embodied existence.

Chapter 3: The Deconstruction of Oppositions: Speech-Writing, Mind-Body

This chapter discusses the ways in which Derrida's philosophical career has also been an attempt to come to terms with the dualisms that have typified the Western tradition. While there are some important differences between his and Merleau-Ponty's respective treatments of opposition, Derrida's famous refutation of the speech-writing hierarchy will be examined in order to ascertain what this might indicate about his treatment of dualisms more generally. Although Derrida rarely comments directly on embodiment, by establishing his general strategies for dealing with oppositions this chapter will enable some reflection on how deconstruction might approach the particularities of the mind-body dualism. In this respect, some key notions from *Of Grammatology* will require explication, including the trace, *différance*, arche-writing, and the supplement. It will be argued that although deconstruction does not necessarily affect a reduction to the linguistic, Derrida does exhibit a reticence to thematise embodiment that is characteristic of his writings throughout much of his career.

Moreover, in *Of Grammatology*, he also makes some enigmatic comments about the mind-body problematic being analogous to the speech-writing problematic, and it is

necessary to consider these statements because they are the basis for the more embodied interpretation of deconstruction that Vicki Kirby presents, and which will be examined in chapter four. By analysing such suggestions, this chapter will also broach the question about why Derrida goes to such lengths to distance deconstruction from the phenomenological tradition with which his career began.

Chapter 4: Kirby, 'Corporeography', and the Question of an Embodied Deconstruction

This chapter will contribute to the previous one in a more concrete way via a consideration of Vicki Kirby's book *Telling Flesh*, which tentatively proposes a deconstructive notion of embodiment. While Derrida's treatment of dualisms does have some important consequences for embodiment, this chapter will highlight places where Kirby tries to make more use of Derridean material than she is justified in doing, and also reveal where some of her formulations become heavily reliant upon aphorisms. Moreover, it will be argued that these enigmatic formulations can be more fruitfully filled in by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty – and in particular the reversibility thesis that is evident in *The Visible and the Invisible* – than by the work of Derrida. It will be concluded that although Derrida can be a helpful resource in such matters, the idea of "matter being generative through differentiation with itself" requires a more embodied focus than his philosophy ever actually supplies, and that Kirby's account would have been richer for the 'presence' of Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter 5: The Later Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and the Metaphysics of Presence

This chapter will argue that the "indirect" ontology involved in *The Visible and the Invisible* cannot be referred to as merely another version of the metaphysics of presence. Moreover, Derrida's general criticisms of phenomenology for harbouring a nostalgia for a temporal 'now' moment, do not gain a critical purchase upon Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy. This needs to be established if his philosophy is to be accorded the position that it warrants in the current intellectual climate, and if we are to take seriously the notion of responsibility towards alterity that will eventually be attributed to him.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of a "hyper-dialectic" is actually quite closely related to Derrida's own refusal to indulge in dialectic, and there is a curious convergence between these two thinkers in regard to some important aspects of their treatment of dualisms, and of their relationship to philosophy more generally.

Chapter 5b: The *Punctum Caecum*: *Memoirs of the Blind* and *The Visible and the Invisible*

In 1991, Derrida published *Memoirs of the Blind*, and considered the work of Merleau-Ponty at length. This chapter will explore Derrida's text and the paradoxical blindness that he discerns in the vision of the painter, before considering how Derrida relates this to Merleau-Ponty's own thesis regarding the invisibility that must always partake in the visible. Once more, some important similarities between their respective positions are revealed that serve to augment the argument that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does not conform to the metaphysics of presence, but there is also a difference between their positions that will become important. While both thinkers insist upon the necessary blindness that must accompany all sight (the *punctum caecum* of the retina), Derrida verges on legitimising an absolute invisibility that has nothing whatsoever to do with visibility, and Merleau-Ponty denies this in his own account. This difference is important because it will be replicated in their respective conceptions of responsibility towards alterity, and it will eventually be argued that Merleau-Ponty's position is the more satisfactory.

Chapter 6: Habituality and Undecidability: A Comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on the Decision

This chapter will examine a point of dissension in their respective accounts of decision-making. Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy emphasises the body-subject's tendency to seek an equilibrium with the world (by acquiring skills and establishing what he refers to as "intentional arcs"), and hence towards deciding in an embodied and habitual manner that minimises any confrontation with a decision-making aporia. On the other hand, in his later writings Derrida frequently points to a constitutive 'undecidability' involved in decision-making. He insists that a decision, if it is to genuinely be a decision, must

involve a leap beyond all prior preparations. One must always decide without any equilibrium or stability, and yet these are precisely the things that Merleau-Ponty claims that our body moves us towards. This chapter will explore the significance of this disparity, and while it is not an either/or situation, many of Merleau-Ponty's insights challenge Derrida's conception of the undecidability involved in decision-making. This becomes most obvious when comparing the decision-making processes of those expert in a particular field to those who are merely competent (eg. chess), and it will be argued that Derrida's later philosophy, like his earlier philosophy, is hence at some distance from considering embodiment in any sustained way.

PART 2: THE OTHER

Chapter 7: Solipsism and the Master-Slave Dialectic: An Onto-Ethical Dissonance between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

This chapter analyses Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Sartre's master-slave dialectic, as they appear in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. As well as asserting that Sartrean conflict must always presuppose something shared, Merleau-Ponty argues that Sartre's position marks the triumph of a "disguised solipsism". He thinks that Sartre's "agnosticism in regard to the other's alterity" (they are nothing but a threat) is, paradoxically, the worst of infringements upon it. Instead, Merleau-Ponty's conception of responsibility towards alterity emphasises the ways in which self and other are chiasmically intertwined with one another.

A significant question for this thesis will be to what extent Derrida's own exaltation of alterity might also be referred to as "agnostic" and as being symptomatic of a "disguised solipsism". While Derrida's position does not result in the other being nothing but a threat, chapters nine and ten will argue that there are some questions worth asking about his more recent conception of alterity, which like the Sartrean account, can actually be envisaged as denying the importance of the ways in which self and other are intertwined together. Moreover, what is significant about Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Sartre, is that he argues that Sartre's mistakes are intimately tied to his ontology and to a dualistic split between mind and body. While Derrida will not be accused of partaking in a simple dualism (deconstruction is predicated upon revealing dualisms as always already breached), it has been established that he is reluctant to talk about embodiment and this

has consequences for his conception of responsibility towards alterity.

Chapter 8 (a & b): Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, and the Alterity of the Other

Suggesting that phenomenology results in an "imperialism of the same" that considers the other only in terms of their effect upon the subject, rather than in their genuine alterity, Lévinas initiates a line of thought that can still be discerned in the work of Foucault, Derrida and Claude Lefort. However, it will be argued that Merleau-Ponty's work is capable of avoiding this line of criticism, and that his position is an important alternative to the more dominant Derridean and Lévinasian conceptions of alterity. Moreover, this chapter will also extricate Merleau-Ponty from Lévinas' claim that his philosophy is "sustained by an unaccountable affection". Rather than ignoring the alterity of the other, and also without presupposing some primordial affectionate bond with the other, Merleau-Ponty explicates an interesting conception of what responsibility towards the 'otherness of the other' should consist in. Basically, he insists upon the way in which self and other are always already intertwined together (or reversible), and suggests that respecting the alterity of the other should involve the imperative to further immerse oneself in this transformative bond – to transform what we think of as self, and also what we think of as 'other'. In filling out this claim, consideration will be given to both *The Visible and the Invisible* (part a), as well as his reflections on the task of reading in his abandoned text, *The Prose of the World* (part b).

Chapter 9: The Other of Derridean Deconstruction: Lévinas, Phenomenology, and the Problem of Responsibility

This chapter examines an aporia that is discernible in Derrida's more recent writings: that is, the tension his work bears between emphasising an absolute and irrecuperable alterity that is always deferred and always "to come", and his simultaneous insistence that the other is always already within the self. These two aspects of his treatment of alterity do not necessarily contradict one another, but it will be argued that Derrida inclines towards a position that is not dissimilar to that which we might attribute to Lévinas, and this despite Derrida's quite significant criticisms of Lévinas throughout his career – most notably in "Violence and Metaphysics". However, Derrida's position need not be

uncritically accepted, and this chapter will implicitly draw comparison with Merleau-Ponty's account.

More specifically, this chapter will undertake an analysis of *The Gift of Death*. Abraham's sacrifice of his son upon Mt Moriah exemplifies an aporia that Derrida associates with all responsibility – that being the dual imperatives between responsibility before a singular other (eg. a loved one, or God) and a more general responsibility before all others. However, it will be argued that Derrida prioritises the first aspect of responsibility in his repeated insistence upon a "radical singularity", and this chapter will ask some questions about the validity of such a move, and express some dissatisfaction with Derrida's account of responsibility towards alterity. In this text, it seems to depend on reinstalling a self-other binarism, and although such a charge is difficult to sustain against him on a more general level, it will be argued that his conception of responsibility towards the other prioritises the aspects of them that cannot be known – that is, the messianic aspects of the other which must prove elusive. It will be argued that although such aspects of responsibility are important, they also need to be counterbalanced by other more phenomenological considerations (ie. a relational conception of alterity), and ones that are more closely aligned with the chiasmic ontology that Merleau-Ponty theorises.

Chapter 10: Possible and Impossible, Self and Other, and the Reversibility of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida

This chapter will conclude via reflection upon some of Derrida's 'possible-impossible' aporias that have yet to be considered in any detail, including his discussions of giving, hospitality, forgiving, and mourning. He argues that the condition of the possibility of such themes is also, and at once, the condition of their impossibility. In order to reveal the shared logic upon which these aporias rely, and also to raise some questions about their persuasive efficacy, it will be argued that of the two polarities evoked by each of his possible-impossible aporias, one term of the opposition invariably posits a separation between "two radical singularities", or in somewhat more controversial terms, between a self and an other. In this respect, it will be argued that Merleau-Ponty's abiding emphasis upon the chiasmic intertwining of self and other provides the resources to challenge the aporetic oscillation between possible and impossible that Derrida so frequently

delineates.

Moreover, it will be highlighted that Derrida's methodology again equivocates between two main alternatives: he either remains within a possible-impossible aporia (and hence implies that there is no way of escaping the paradox in which all giving is also always a taking); or he becomes prophetic in the face of this aporia, and hence tacitly privileges a rather absolute conception of an alterity (*tout autre*) that might yet come and disrupt this calculative exchange. It will be argued that Merleau-Ponty would accuse the latter tendency of being tantamount to an "agnosticism in regard to the other", and his philosophy also has some correlative implications regarding the problem of the alterity of the other. The important differences that obtain between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's respective treatments of alterity will be teased out via discussions of two of Derrida's texts – *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, and *Memoires: for Paul De Man.*

PART 1: EMBODIMENT

2. Merleau-Ponty, the Body-Subject, and the Disciplining of Reflection

When asked about whether he was contemplating retirement on account of illness and the ravages of advancing age, Pope John Paul II confirmed that he was and bemoaned the fact that "my body is no longer a docile instrument, but a cage"[13]. While it is difficult to deny that a docile and easily manipulable body might be preferable to its decaying alternative – a body that prevents us acting as we wish – both positions are united by a rather literal adherence to the mind-body duality, and the subordination of one term of that duality. Of course, such a dualistic metaphysics and the denunciation of the body that it usually entails is not restricted to religious traditions. This denigration of embodiment governs most philosophical thought until at least Nietzsche. Even Heidegger's attempts at inaugurating a 'post-metaphysical' phenomenology, for all of their considerable merits, have been accused of deferring the question of the body[14]. Evaluating such a claim is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it cannot be denied that issues regarding embodiment have presented something of a problem for the philosophical tradition, and David Levin has concluded that this implies that if we seek to move "beyond metaphysics, our new and more radical thinking must pass the trial posed by the human body"[15]. While there are good reasons to be wary of any philosopher who too quickly seeks to get beyond metaphysics[16], an exploration of the significance of our non-dualistic experience (which must nevertheless retain a divergence) is a project of some importance, and it is one that preoccupied Merleau-Ponty throughout his career.

While a major figure in French phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, at least until relatively recently, has rarely been accorded the amount of attention of many of his

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[13] *The Age Newspaper*, 15/1/2000, Reuters, p 24.

[14] Levin, D., *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, p 60. According to Levin, Heidegger fails to think of the body as instantiating the ontic-ontological difference. Instead, he claims that Heidegger either thinks of the body ontically, or he asks the ontological question about the essence of our body. For Levin, the first method is inadequate for ontological thought, but so is the absolute ontology of the second, whose grammar "of essence tends to stand opposite the body" and hence perpetuates the hierarchical tendencies of the metaphysical tradition in which the body is rendered inessential and derivative.

[15] Levin, D., *The Body's Recollection of Being*, p 47.

[16] By insisting that we must break out of metaphysics through more attentively thinking "the concreteness, specificity and immediacy" of our embodied existence, Levin, in my opinion, perpetuates a nostalgia for origins – the very essence of metaphysics. The arguments of this thesis are importantly distinct from the simple opposition of the body to metaphysics that he propounds. See Levin, D., *The Body's Recollection of Being*, p 43.

compatriots. This has been a considerable oversight, as it is doubtful that any other philosopher, phenomenologist or otherwise, has ever paid such sustained attention to the significance of the body in relation to the self, to the world, and to others. There is no aspect of his phenomenology that does not implicate the body, or what he terms the body-subject, and more significantly, his descriptions of the constitutive ambiguity of the body-subject are an important attempt to overcome the mind-body dualism. As will soon become apparent, they allow us to reconceive the problem of embodiment in terms of the body's practical capacity to act, rather than in terms of any essential trait[17].

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, which is arguably his major work, Merleau-Ponty sets about exposing the problematic nature of traditional philosophical dichotomies, and in particular that apparently age-old dualism involving the mind and the body. It is no accident that consideration of this dualism plays such an important role in all of his work, since the constitution of the body as an 'object' is also a pivotal moment in the construction of the idea of an objective world that exists 'out there' (PP 72). Once this conception of the body is problematised, so too, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the whole idea of an outside world that is entirely distinguishable from the thinking subject.

Merleau-Ponty criticises the tendency of philosophy to fall within two main categories, neither of which is capable of shedding much light on the problems that it seeks to address. He is critical of the rationalist, Cartesian accounts of humanity, as well as of the more empirical and behaviouristic attempts to designate the human condition.

Rationalism is problematic because it ignores our situation, and consequently the contingent nature of thought, when it makes the world, or at least meaning, the immanent property of the reflecting mind. One quote from Descartes is particularly illustrative of this type of attitude:

> If I chance to look out of the window onto men passing in the street, I do not fail to say, on seeing them, that I see men... and yet, what do I see from this window, other than hats and cloaks, which cover ghosts or dummies who move only by means of springs? But I judge them to be really men, and thus I understand, by the sole power of judgement that resides in my mind, what I believed I saw with my eyes[18].

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[17]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., "The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science" in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, eds. Haber & Weiss, London: Routledge, 1999, p 103–19.

[18]Descartes, R., *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Cottingham, Cambridge: Cambridge University

Descartes' prioritising of the mental above the physical (and indeed the duality itself) is obvious here and this is something that Merleau-Ponty strongly rejects. As well as being unjust to existential experience, it also leaves the problem of meaningful judgement untouched. The account presupposes the meaningful judgement of hats and cloaks, rather than explaining how this perception could actually be meaningful[19]. We will return to such criticisms of Cartesianism, but for the moment it is more important to have an accurate understanding of where Merleau-Ponty situates his philosophy, than it is to have a systematic comprehension of exactly why he refutes rationalism, or what he synonymously terms "intellectualism".

According to Merleau-Ponty, empiricism also makes our cultural world an illusion. For him, perception is not merely the result of the functioning of individual organs, but also a vital and performative human act in which 'I' perceive through the relevant organs. Each of the senses informs the others in virtue of their common behavioural project, or concern with a certain human endeavour, and perception is inconceivable without this complementary functioning. Empiricism generally ignores this and Merleau-Ponty contends that whatever their efficacy in explaining certain phenomena, these type of scientific and analytic causalities cannot actually appraise meaning and human action. As one critic points out: "if we attempt to localise and sectionalise the various activities which manifest themselves at the bodily level, we lose the signification of the action itself"[20]. In the terms of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, such an analysis would "recuperate everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it would clarify everything except its own role" (VI 33).

The main point to extract from this is that, for Merleau-Ponty, both empiricism and intellectualism are eminently flawed positions:

> In the first case consciousness is too poor, in the second too rich for any phenomenon to appeal compellingly to it. Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and

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Press, 1986, p 21. This quotation is also cited in Crossley, N., *The Politics of Subjectivity: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty*, Aldershot, England: Brookfield, USA, Avebury Series in Philosophy, 1994, p 10. I will refer to Crossley quite frequently in this chapter because he provides one of the best accounts of the embodied habituality that is such an important factor in Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy. I will also re-employ two of Crossley's particularly well-chosen citations of Merleau-Ponty, although both times for quite different purposes.

[19]Crossley, N., p 10.

[20]Barral, M., *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of the Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965, p 94.

> intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching (PP 28).

It is not difficult to see why Merleau-Ponty would be preoccupied with undermining such dichotomous tendencies. Essentially it ensures that one exists as a constituting thing (subject) or as a thing (object). Moreover, that perennial philosophical debate regarding whether humanity is free or determined is more than tangentially related, and all of these issues are inextricably intertwined in what Foucault aptly terms the "empirico-transcendental doublet of modern thought"[21]. This ontological dualism of immanence and transcendence – see mind/body, thought/language, self/world, inside/outside – is at the forefront of all of Merleau-Ponty's attempts to re-orientate philosophy.

As Stephen Priest points out, while Merleau-Ponty does not simplistically deny the possibility of cognitive relations between subject and object that underpins this doublet, he does repudiate the suggestion that these facts are phenomenologically primitive[22]. It may be useful, in a particular situation, to conceive of a seer and a seen, a subject and an object. Many scientific endeavours fruitfully rely upon the methodological ideal of a detached consciousness observing brute facts about the world. Merleau-Ponty can accommodate this, provided that the terms of such dualities are recognised as relationally constituted. In other words, for him, the seer and the seen condition one another and, of course, there is an obvious sense in which our capacity for seeing does depend on our capacity for being seen – that is, being physically embodied in what Merleau-Ponty has occasionally described as an "inter-individual" world[23].

In this repudiation of traditional metaphysical philosophy and its governing subject-object relationship, it is unsurprising that when speaking of his phenomenological method, Merleau-Ponty suggests that "the demand for a pure description excludes equally the procedure of analytical reflection on the one hand, and that of scientific explanation on the other" (PP ix). Only by avoiding these tendencies, according to him, can we

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[21]Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. anon, New York: Vintage Books, 1970, p xiv. Foucault's discussion of the "empirico-transcendental doublet" points towards a roughly similar bifurcation in the philosophical tradition to that which Merleau-Ponty discerns between intellectualism and empiricism. One major difference, however, is that Foucault considers Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to remain within the either/or tendencies of the philosophical tradition, and while this thesis will not explore Foucault's own argument in this regard, the Derridean variation upon this argument is considered in chapter five.

[22]Priest, S., *Merleau-Ponty*, London: Routledge, 1998, p 49.

[23]Silverman, H., *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, p 73. As Silverman suggests, by using this term Merleau-Ponty is simply trying to avoid remaining within the metaphysical tradition by categorising our relations with others as either

"rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being" (PP 219).

Phenomenology of Perception is hence united by the claim that we are our bodies, and that our lived experience of this body denies the detachment of subject from object, mind from body, etc. (PP xii). In this embodied state of being, where the ideational and the material are intimately linked, human existence cannot be conflated into any particular paradigm, as "there is no meaning which is not embodied, nor any matter that is not meaningful"[24]. It should be clear from this, that Merleau-Ponty's statement that 'I am my body' cannot simply be interpreted as advocating a physicalist, behaviourist type position. He does not deny or ignore those aspects of our life that are commonly called the 'mental' – and what would be left if he did? – but he does want to suggest that the use of this 'mind' is inseparable from our bodily, situated, and physical nature. According to Elizabeth Grosz, this means simply that the perceiving mind is an incarnated body[25], or as another commentator recognises, "he enriches the concept of the body to allow it to think, to perceive"[26]. It is also for these reasons that we are best served by referring to the individual as not simply a body, but as a body-subject[27].

The *Phenomenology of Perception* is almost entirely devoted to illustrating that the body cannot be viewed solely as an object or material entity of the world. Perception has been a prominent theme in Merleau-Ponty's efforts to establish this, and even in his latest work he still holds its primacy as our clearest relationship to Being, and in which the inadequacy of dualistic thinking is most explicitly revealed. However, despite the titles of two of his major works (*Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Primacy of Perception*), for Merleau-Ponty, perception, at least as the term is usually construed, is paradoxically not really a guiding principle in his work. This is because the practical modes of action of the body-subject are inseparable from the perceiving body-subject (or at least mutually informing), since it is precisely through the body that we have access to the world. Nick Crossley conveys this idea well when he suggests that "perception... involves the perceiving subject in a situation, rather than positioning them as a

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inter*subjective* or inter*objective*.
[24]Crossley, N., p 14.
[25]Grosz, E., *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994.
[26]Priest, S., p 50.
[27]Langer, M., *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and a Commentary*, Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1989.

spectator"[28]. There is hence an interconnection of action and perception, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "every perceptual habit is still a motor habit" (PP 153).

This ensures that there is no lived distinction between the act of perceiving and the thing perceived. This will become clearer when his later philosophy is considered, as the figure of the chiasm becomes an important ontological motif for explaining how and why this is the case. At this stage, however, it suffices to recognise that, for Merleau-Ponty, "in the natural attitude, I do not have *perceptions*" (PP 281). Moreover, in his final, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he states that "we exclude the term perception to the whole extent that it already implies a cutting up of what is lived into discontinuous acts, or a reference to things whose status is not specified, or simply an opposition between the visible and the invisible" (VI 157–8). Hence, as Gary Madison has pointed out, "what traditionally has been referred to as 'perception', no longer figures in Merleau-Ponty's post-foundationalist mode of thinking"[29], and Derrida's insistence that there is no such phenomenon as perception is also not as divergent a line of thought as is commonly presumed[30].

Deferring any sustained consideration of the relationship between these two French thinkers until forthcoming chapters, to the degree that we can actually speak of Merleau-Ponty's account of perception, it essentially suggests the same thing as the rest of his work: it criticises the tendency of philosophy to bifurcate between two positions. As Merleau-Ponty suggests:

> We started off from a world in itself, which acted upon our eyes so as to cause us to see it, and now we have consciousness of, or thought about the world, but the nature of the world remains unchanged; it is still defined by the absolute mutual exteriority of its parts, and is merely duplicated throughout its extent by a thought which sustains it (PP 39).

As well as objecting to this kind of dichotomy, Merleau-Ponty is also concerned with the common perceptual paradigm that firstly involves passively seeing something, and then requires that brute biological perception to be interpreted. Such an account presumes that

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[28]Crossley, N., p 13.
[29]Madison, G., "Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 83.
[30]Derrida has famously stated: "I don't know what perception is, and I don't believe that anything like perception exists" (See Derrida, J., "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Discourse of Human Sciences" in *The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. Macksey & Donato, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972, p 272). He also propounds a similar argument in *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. Allison, Evanston:

one exists either as a thing or as a consciousness (PP 198), but according to him, the perceiving body-subject conforms to neither of these positions; its mode of existence is manifestly more complicated and ambiguous. As hard as we may try, we cannot see the broken shards of a beer bottle as simply the sum of its colour, shape, etc. The whole background apparatus of what that bottle is used for, what consuming the liquids contained therein means for different people, and what it is for something to be 'broken', comes with, and not behind, our perception of that bottle. For Merleau-Ponty, perception cannot be characterised as a type of thought in a classical, reflective sense, but equally clearly it is also far from being a third person process where we attain access to a rarefied, pure object. Just as for Heidegger, we cannot hear pure noise, but always a noise of some activity[31], the objects that we encounter in the world are always of a particular kind and relevant to certain human intentions (explicit or otherwise), and we cannot step outside this instrumentality to some realm of purified objects, or for that matter thought.

Perception then, is not merely passive before sensory stimulation, but as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is a "creative receptivity". In this respect, it is interesting to observe that our modern vernacular incorporates this more 'active' and appropriative dimension of perception. After all, one is often commended for 'perceptive' observations, and for this to function as a compliment at all, it must admit of an individual's creative influence and hence some responsibility over the manner in which they perceive.

More empirically, it is worth pointing out that if we were merely passive before a sensory image it would not be possible to see different aspects of things as we so often do, or for different individuals to construe a particular representation differently. Consider Jastrow's/Wittgenstein's famous example in which a picture can be variously interpreted as a duck or a rabbit[32], or the ubiquitous psychological diagram that highlights

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Northwestern University Press, 1973, p 75, 104, 154).

[31]Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarie & Robinson, London: SCM Press, 1962, p 207. A detailed examination of the relationship that Merleau-Ponty's work bears to Heidegger would take us too far afield of our main purposes, but at least on the most obvious level, there is a similarity in their respective notions of the pre-reflective cogito and what Heidegger terms the ready-to-hand. Both notions affirm the way in which objects, sounds, or even environments generally, are construed first in terms of their practical and instrumental relation to the perceiver – all other modes of knowing are subsidiary to this everyday understanding, and this is something that Merleau-Ponty also emphasises through the priority that he accords to the "I can", rather than the "I think" (PP 137). For a detailed exposition of the Heideggerian distinction between the ready-to-hand, the present-to-hand (the mode of understanding where entities become material objects rather than practical tools), and the even more subsidiary mode of pure-presence-to-hand, see Hanna, R., "On the Sublimity of Logic: A Heideggerian Analysis" in *The Monist*, April 1996, Vol. 69, no. 2.

[32]Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996, section 2, p 194e. For a more detailed account of Wittgenstein's contributions to perception and what he thinks is

the capacity of an individual to see a vase at one moment and two faces confronting one another at the next, depending upon which part of the diagram they determine to be the background. These experiential studies reinforce Merleau-Ponty's fundamental point that we are not simply passive before sensorial stimulation, since the visual experience seems to change and yet nothing changes optically with respect to colour, shape, or distance. What we literally see or notice is hence not simply the objective world, but is conditioned by a myriad of factors that ensures the relationship between perceiving subject and the object perceived is not one of exclusion. Rather, each term exists only through its dialectical relation to the other, and from this analysis of the perceiving body-subject, Merleau-Ponty enigmatically concludes that "inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (PP 407).

Without digressing to consider the proximity of such sentiments to some of those proposed by Derrida, particularly in *Of Grammatology*, for Merleau-Ponty this inseparability of inner and outer ensures that a study of the perceived ends up revealing the subject perceiving. It is precisely this ambiguous intertwining of inner and outer, as it is revealed in a phenomenological analysis of the body, which the intellectualism of philosophy cannot appreciate. According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophers of reflection ignore the paradoxical condition of all human subjectivity: that is, the fact that we are both a part of the world and coextensive with it, constituting but also constituted (PP 453). However, if perception is not grounded in either an objective or subjective component (ie. it is not objectively received before a subjective interpretation), but by a reciprocal openness that resides between such categories, this would seem to endow perception with an instability that it clearly does not have.

Merleau-Ponty caters for this stability through the body's tendency to seek an equilibrium through skilful coping, or what he often terms habituality[33]. To summarise, he affirms how perception is learnt, primarily through imitation, in an embodied and communal environment. While perception is subject to change, just as communities can

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involved in "seeing an aspect", see Budd, M., *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989.

[33]While they are involved in substantially different philosophical projects, Merleau-Ponty's discussions of habituality appear to play a curiously similar role in his philosophy to that which the concept of mastering a technique does for Wittgenstein. Both notions refer to a type of skilful activity that is not simply ignorant or non-reflective, and yet which also allows of no recourse to 'mentalistic' terms. See Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 150, 199 & 209. While a more sustained examination of the equivalences and divergences of their respective notions promises to be an interesting project, it cannot be attempted here.

change over periods of time, this possibility does not allow for wild fluctuations in perceptive experience from one moment to the next. Habit, and the production of schemes in regard to the body's mobilisation, "gives our life the form of generality and prolongs our personal acts into stable dispositions" (PP 146). This tendency of our body to seek its own equilibrium and to form habits is an important component of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and it is a theme that will be returned to in chapter six.

For the moment, however, it is necessary to turn to other manifestations of Merleau-Ponty's argument for the body-subject. Another idea of central significance for him, is the fact that the body is always there and that its absence (and to a certain degree also its variation) is inconceivable (PP 91). It means that we cannot treat the body as an object available for perusal, which can or cannot be part of our world, since it is not something that we can possibly do without. It is the mistake of classical psychology, not to mention the empiricism of all sciences, that it treats the body as an object, when for Merleau-Ponty, an object "is an object only insofar as it can be moved away from me... Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence. Now the permanence of my body is entirely different in kind" (PP 90). It is difficult to fault this claim that the omnipresence of our body prevents us treating it simply as an object of the world, even though such an apparently axiomatic position is not always recognised by traditional philosophy as we have seen exemplified by Descartes.

Another factor against conceiving of the body as being completely constituted and an object in-itself, is the fact that it is that by which there are objects. Our motility testifies that the body cannot be the mere servant of consciousness, since "in order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the in-itself" (PP 139). This Kantian term (in-itself), which was later appropriated by Sartre, will be given more attention in later chapters, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that Merleau-Ponty is simply making explicit that the aspects of an object revealed to an individual are dependent upon their bodily position.

Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, we are not accorded quite the same privilege in viewing our own bodies as we have in viewing other 'objects'. This is because "the presentation of objects in perspective cannot be understood except through the resistance of my body to all variation of perspective" (PP 92, cf. VI 9). We cannot see our own body as the other does, and it seems relatively clear that we do need the other to attain

awareness of ourselves as a body-subject. Even our vision of ourselves in a mirror is always mediated by body image, and hence by the other, and it would seem that we cannot look at our own mirror image in the same way that we can appreciate the appearance of others. These more existential aspects of our existence suggest that there is something fundamentally true about Merleau-Ponty's more general argument that our body should be conceived of as our means of communication with the world, rather than merely as an object of the world that our transcendent mind orders to perform varying functions.

Merleau-Ponty offers one particularly powerful example of the body as a means of communication, which also makes it clear that a subject-object model of exchange deprives the existential phenomena of their true complexity. He suggests that:

> If I touch with my left hand my right hand while it touches an object, the right hand object is not the right hand touching: the first is an intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh bearing down on a point in space, the second traverses space as a rocket in order to discover the exterior object in its place (PP 92).

This example of the hand touching itself represents the body's capacity to occupy the position of both perceiving object and subject of perception. As he puts it, "when I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the role of 'touching' and being 'touched'" (PP 93). Mark Yount expresses Merleau-Ponty's point well when he suggests that "the reflexivity of this touching-touched exceeds the logic of dichotomy: the two are not entirely distinguished, since the roles can be reversed; but the two are not identical, since touching and touched can never fully coincide"[34]. As with the caress, this double touching and encroachment of the touching onto the touched (and vice versa), where subject and object cannot be unequivocally discerned, is representative of perception and sensibility generally. Pre-empting the more explicit ontology of *The Visible and the Invisible* (with which we will become increasingly concerned), Merleau-Ponty tacitly argues for the "reversibility" of the body – its capacity to be both sentient and sensible – and reaffirms his basic contention that incarnate consciousness is the central phenomenon of which mind and body are abstract moments (PP 193).

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[34]Yount, M., "Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 216–7.

However, Merleau-Ponty has another vitally important and related point to make about the status of our bodies that precludes them from being categorised simply as objects. According to him, we move directly and in union with our bodies. As he points out, "I do not need to lead it [*the body*] towards a movement's completion, it is in contact with it from the start and propels itself towards that end" (PP 94). In other words, we do not need to check to see if we have two legs before we stand up, since we are necessarily *with* our bodies. The consequences of this simple idea, however, are more extensive than one may presume.

The sporting arena also testifies to this being with our bodies, as does the wave or other gesture that simply responds to given circumstances without the intervention of traditional philosophical conceptions of thought and/or intention. For instance, the basketball player who says that he or she is "in the zone" perceives the terrain in accordance with some general intentions, but these are modified by the situation in which they find themselves. Their actions are solicited by the situations that confront them in a constantly evolving way.

In his early work, *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty also makes use of a sporting analogy. He suggests that:

> For the player in action the football field is not an 'object', that is, the ideal term which can give rise to a multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the 'yard lines'; those which demarcate the penalty area) and articulated in sectors (for example, the 'openings' between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the goal, for example, just as immediately as the vertical and horizontal planes of his own body (SB 168).

Nick Crossley interprets this particular passage as implying that "to perceive the football pitch, it is not necessary that an individual be aware of perceiving it"[35], and while he is correct, this is not the only significance of this revealed mode of being. The perceptions and actions of the sportsperson reveal a form of intelligence that informs much of our everyday interaction, and that refutes many dichotomous positions (PP 142), most

obvious among these being the insistence that a separate act of interpretation (to determine a goal or intention) is necessary to give action a meaningful form. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of sporting activity also suggest that as we refine our skills for coping with existence (based upon past experiences) scenarios show up as soliciting those acquired skilful responses, and it is this aspect of his work that attracts Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus' attention. The particularities of their interpretation of Merleau-Ponty will become more important in chapter six, but for the moment it needs only to be pointed out that for them, this "skilful coping does not require a mental representation of its goal. It can be purposive without the agent entertaining a purpose"[36], and this pre-reflective mode of existence reveals many of the postulations of dualistic thinking as abstractions.

Moreover, if this purposive action without a purpose (other than best accommodating oneself to the situation in which one is immersed) is forestalled, say if a particular golfer starts to ponder the intricacies of their swing, where their feet are positioned, mental outlook, etc., rather than simply responding, it is certainly probable that they will lose form. So what, one may ask? According to Merleau-Ponty, the point is that "whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an 'I think', it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium" (PP 153). The emphasis upon rationalistic thought and its tendency to dissect human behaviour through the 'I think' can conspire to turn us away from the body's acclimatisation to its own environment. Merleau-Ponty explores a more basic motivation for human action than is usually taken to be the case: rather than focusing upon our desire to attain certain pleasures or achieve certain goals, his analysis reveals the body's more primordial tendency to form what he calls "intentional arcs", and to try and achieve an equilibrium with the world.

Indeed, through reference to embodied activity, Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that our actions and the perceptions involved in those actions are largely habitual: that is, they are learnt through imitation and responsiveness within an environment, and to a community. Without such a pre-reflective base, language-games would be unlearnable, and as Wittgenstein was also beginning to do at the same historical moment (the early 1940s), Merleau-Ponty hence emphasises the philosophical importance of the act of learning and training. According to him, metaphysical philosophy has been unable to

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[35]Crossley, N., p 13.
[36]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 111.

address these phenomena adequately (PP 142), and it is worth repeating an important sentence from *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty argues that empiricism and intellectualism (the two logical outcomes of metaphysical thought) "are in agreement in that neither can grasp consciousness in the act of learning, and that neither attaches due importance to that circumscribed ignorance, that still empty but always determinate intention which is attention itself" (PP 28).

This emphasis upon consciousness in the act of learning is also what Dreyfus and Dreyfus are intent on exploring in relation to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and they agree that in the act of learning, consciousness is irremediably embodied. They ask: "if everything is similar to everything else in an indefinitely large number of ways, what constrains the space of possible generalisations so that trial and error learning has a chance of succeeding? Here is where the body comes in"[37]. With a view to forthcoming chapters, it is worth suggesting that this emphasis upon embodiment might apply equally if everything is dissimilar, other to everything else – the body narrows this disparate range of phenomena down, or more accurately, renders them intelligible. Our skilful embodiment makes it possible for us to encounter "more and more differentiated solicitations to act"[38], and enables us to react to situations in ways that have previously proved successful and which do not require purposive thought.

In order to fathom what Dreyfus' "embodied solicitations to act" might involve, it is worth contemplating the views of another commentator who also emphasises the importance of the body in learning. Mary Barral suggests that:

> Movements of the body are developed almost without conscious effort, in most cases. There seems to be a sort of intelligence of the body: a new dance is learned without analysing the sequence of movements. Children learn dances very easily and well... This is also the reason why habits can be formed: the body seems to have understood and retained the new meaning[39].

According to this description, it is not usually through conscious reflection and analysis that a dance or other language-game is learnt, but through repeated embodied efforts that are modified until the 'right' movements are achieved. This intelligence of the body (ie. its capacity to innovate and retain new meaning) again denies the emphasis that much of the philosophical tradition has placed upon interpretation, and certainly any conception of

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[37]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 117.
[38]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 104.

interpretation that contrasts itself with a purely passive perception. Moreover, this can also be envisaged to apply to so-called 'intellectual' professions in much the same way as it does to dancers. In reacting to their own different but nevertheless distinct set of influences, they still choose modes of action in relation to past success. Even in the most apparently 'thoughtful' of activities, the body inclines itself towards an equilibrium[40].

This habituality to which we are referring is far from being merely a mechanistic or behaviouristic propensity to pursue a certain line of action. Our habitual mode of being is constantly being altered (in however small a way), and habit is hence more akin to a competence, or what Crossley refers to as a "flexible skill, a power of action and reaction"[41] that can be mobilised under different conditions to achieve different effects (PP 143). However, we may want to ask, as Merleau-Ponty does, "if habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action, what is it then?". According to him, "it is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort" (PP 144). Merleau-Ponty suggests that this type of "knowledge in the hands" is primordial, and he implies that if we completely detach ourselves from this habitual base we risk embarking upon philosophic and scientific endeavours that are of no practical benefit, and that might also artificially serve to legitimise the mind-body dualism.

Crossley provides another good example of this practical and embodied intelligence that Merleau-Ponty so insistently points us towards: he suggests that when we drive a car, we are intimately aware of how a particular car's gearshift needs to be treated, as well as its ability to turn, accelerate, brake, etc., and importantly, also of the dimensions of the vehicle. When we reflect on our own parking experiences, it is remarkable that there are so few minor collisions considering how many times we are forced to come very close. Indeed, when reversing, many drivers need not really monitor the progress of their car because they 'know' (in the sense of a harmony between aim and intention) what result the various movements of the steering wheel are likely to induce. The car is absorbed into our body schema with almost the same precision that we have regarding our own spatiality. It becomes an "area of sensitivity" which extends "the scope and active radius of the touch" (PP 143) and, as Crossley suggests, it is "not that

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[39]Barral, M., p 137.
[40]This suggestion is explored at length in relation to the activities of an expert chess player in chapter six.
[41]Crossley, N., p 12.

we think about the car, but that we think from the point of view of the car"[42] and consequently also perceive our environment in a different way. Notably, this thinking is not reflective or interpretive – we do not have to perceive the distance to a car park and then reflect upon the fact that we are in a car of such and such proportions before the delicate manoeuvre can be attempted. Rather, it is a practical mastery of a technique that ensures that the given rules can be followed blindly (or at least without reflective thought) and yet nevertheless with an embodied intelligence.

In one paragraph from *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty captures these issues particularly well. He observes that:

> We said earlier that it is the body that "understands" in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense datum under an idea, and if the body is an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of "understand" and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in the world (PP 144).

In this paragraph, Merleau-Ponty defines understanding as a harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between intention and performance, and this sheds some light upon his assertion that consciousness is primarily not a matter of "I think", but of "I can" (PP 137). Action in this paradigm is spontaneous and practical, and it is clear that we move phenomenally in a manner antithetical to the mind-body distinction (PP 145).

Dreyfus interprets Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon the "I can" rather than the "I think" of the body-subject, as "simply the body's ability to reduce tension, or to put it another way, to complete gestalts"[43]. At least in one major respect, Dreyfus is correct: the body's tendency to incline towards a harmony between aim and intention does capture the exigencies of Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment well. However, it is worth pointing out that, for Merleau-Ponty, the gestalts are never actually completed, but require constant vigilance and readjustment. Indeed, while habit and the tendency to seek an equilibrium might help us adjust to the circumstances of our world, they do not simply make things easy. For Merleau-Ponty, "what enables us to centre our existence is also what prevents us from centering it completely, and the anonymity of our body is

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[42]Crossley, N., p 16.
[43]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 114.

inseparably both freedom and servitude" (PP 85). To put the problem somewhat glibly, his point seems to be that although the body searches for equilibrium, as a mortal and temporal body it is also precluded from perpetual equilibrium (cf. PP 346).

Nevertheless, if we agree with Merleau-Ponty that knowing is far from an imperative for human action, and also identify understanding and intention with human action, this has ramifications for our forthcoming discussions of the work of Derrida. Perhaps the heavy responsibility of the Derridean notion of 'undecidability' – in which a decision must always leap beyond prior preparations for that decision – can be counterbalanced in a way that Derrida fails to recognise by an appreciation of the spontaneous intelligence involved in the embodied acquisition of skills. This will be considered in chapter six, but for the moment, it is important to consider some aspects of Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment that have only been alluded to, particularly in relation to his suggestion that we move spontaneously and pre-reflectively in accord with our bodies.

According to his version of the pre-reflective cogito, when one motions towards a friend to come nearer, there is no preceding or ancillary thought prepared within me that motivates my action (PP 111). I do not perceive a certain signal in my mind and then decide to act on it, or if I do, it is a rare and derivative occurrence. According to Merleau-Ponty, the immense difference posited by the philosophical tradition between thinking and perceiving (and between mind and body) is hence revealed as a mistake. However, this suggestion that pre-reflective existence does not require interpretation, or any prior formulation of intention, is an important one and deserving of prolonged consideration. Insisting that we cannot discern an interior state that precedes the expression of that state, Merleau-Ponty suggests that "I am not in front of my body, I am in it or rather I am it... If we can still speak of interpretation in relation to the perception of one's own body, we shall have to say that it interprets itself" (PP 150). One would struggle to envisage a much closer relationship to the body than that, and Merleau-Ponty elsewhere goes so far as to suggest that:

> Nothing is changed when the subject is charged with interpreting his reactions himself, which is what is proper to introspection. When he is asked if he can read the letters inscribed on a panel or distinguish the details of a shape, he will not trust a vague "impression of legibility". He will attempt to read or describe what is presented to him (SB 183).

According to Merleau-Ponty then, there is no 'mental' correlate of reading that makes it possible to know definitively that reading is taking place. Faced with the demand that they prove that they have actually read, an individual can only refer with circularity to the words that they themselves have read, repeating what is in front of him or her. If further justification is demanded, one can respond only by pointing out that "this is simply what I do"[44], and that these are the practices that I engage in.

Refusing to accord the 'mental' any privileged status, Merleau-Ponty even argues that:

> If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart throbs – in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate... We must reject the prejudice which makes "inner realities" out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behaviour or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside (SNS 52–3).

Human subjectivity is no longer conceived of as residing in an inaccessible, private domain of the 'mental'. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject entails an affirmation of public and surface interaction, and of the physiognomic qualities of our bodies. This does not preclude deep feelings, but merely suggests that they must necessarily be manifested in our public lives. A disturbance aroused in the affective life of an individual will have correlative repercussions in the physical, perceptive, and expressive life of that person. As will become apparent in chapter seven and beyond, this will have significant ramifications for how we conceive of relationships with the other. However, these are not merely flippant remarks designed only to refute intellectualism and empiricism. Merleau-Ponty has thought through the consequences and recognises, for example, that the Japanese express the emotion of love in significantly different ways to the archetypal French or Australian citizen. But for him, this cultural variance:

> Or to be more precise, this difference of behaviour, corresponds to a difference in the emotions themselves. It is not only the gesture that is contingent in relation to the body's organisation, it is the manner itself in which we meet the situation and live it.... Feelings and passional conduct are invented like words (PP 189).

This quote is slightly misleading, because Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of situation does

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[44]Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, section 217.

not want to suggest that passional conduct can simply be constructed from nothing by a self-actualised individual, as Foucault's later philosophy inadvertently implies[45]. The word invented, which seems to imply an individual inventing something, is the problematic term here. Both passional conduct and words, however, are invented, but by a community and hence subtend any individual existence.

For some commentators, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject, and his emphasis upon the intentional arc that inclines one towards an equilibrium and tacitly suggests the derivative nature of thought and interpretation, induces a picture of humanity that is too easy and not reflective enough. There is, after all, a tendency to interpret his position as being an advocation of simple, spontaneous relations, and a nostalgic desire for some primordial inherence in Being. Mary Barral, among other more recent critics, has contended that his phenomenology does not give the required amount of attention to reflection, as well as other factors that might complicate Merleau-Ponty's spontaneous, pre-reflective state. She suggests that "if one equates the lack of reflection in a phenomenological milieu with a lack of understanding in an intellectualistic-critical philosophy, the results would be equivalent"[46].

However, Barral's remarks do not incriminate Merleau-Ponty, or at least not in the way that she thinks they do. While her suggestions may be true of a certain phenomenology, the question arises as to what extent Merleau-Ponty's philosophy actually bridges this very divide of which she speaks, and hence 'deconstructs' her implied antinomy between reflection and non-reflection. It has been suggested that Merleau-Ponty's work is a synthesis of phenomenology and structuralism[47], and it is also clear that his phenomenology is not a simple effort to reject analytical thought, but merely to discipline it: anything from the analytic paradigm that claims or presupposes a metaphysical truth must not ignore phenomenology. In other words, the milieu of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of situation can accommodate rationality, but it also consigns it to its proper place. While his philosophy does affirm the primacy of

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[45]It is generally agreed that Foucault's thought underwent some important changes towards the end of his life, and although opinions vary on the extent of this change, he clearly became increasingly receptive to the Greek and Nietzschean idea that we create our own lives as one might a work of art. See the later *History of Sexuality* volumes (in particular: Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 2; The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Hurley, Penguin Books, 1992, p 251–5), as well as some interesting comments that Foucault makes in interviews of around the same time-frame pertaining to an "arts of existence".

[46]Barral, M., p 115.

[47]Schmidt, J., *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.

perception, broadly construed to incorporate the practical action that it cannot be distinguished from, this does not simply come at the cost of sacrificing the validity of rational processes. Rather, it grounds them in our situation and reinforces that reflection should not feign ignorance of its origins in perceptual experience[48]. His point is simply that the "I can" precedes and conditions the possibility of the "I know" (PP 137). As Merleau-Ponty states, there is "a privilege of reason, but precisely in order to understand it properly, we must begin by replacing thought amongst the phenomena of perception" (PrP 222).

Analytic thought and philosophy *per se* can and should be used to render pre-reflective experience intelligible, for as he points out:

> It is a question not of putting the perceptual faith in place of reflection, but on the contrary of taking into account the total situation, which involves reference from the one to the other. What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a universe of adequate thought; it is a reflection which turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light (VI 35).

Despite the nostalgic yearning that Merleau-Ponty occasionally seems to have for a primordial union with the world, he nevertheless makes it clear that one never returns to immediate experience. It is only a question of whether we are to try to understand it, and he believes that to attempt to express immediate experience is not to betray reason but, on the contrary, to work towards its aggrandisement. Philosophy is hence a means to improve our way of living, and reason has a role in this, providing that it is based in the phenomenological exigencies of the subject and their life-world. While Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is poised on the margins of philosophy and non-philosophy as Hugh Silverman and others have suggested[49], it is not anti-philosophical in any respect.

However, Barral goes on to proffer the rhetorical question that "one cannot think perceptive consciousness without suppressing it as an originary mode of being: likewise, can one maintain a signification without referring it to intellectual consciousness?"[50]. In other words, she is attempting to suggest that signification and meaning reside in an

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[48]Herbernick, R., "Merleau-Ponty and the Primacy of Reflection" in *The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gillian, Urbana: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, p 92. As is evident from the title alone, Herbernick argues against the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher who exalts the pre-reflective at the expense of the reflective.
[49]Silverman, H., *Inscriptions*, p 126–7.
[50]Barral, M., p 117.

intellectual consciousness (rather than in perceptive consciousness) to which Merleau-Ponty does not pay enough attention. Again, I think that Merleau-Ponty would suggest that this question is a false one and is perpetuating traditional philosophical dichotomies. As has been illustrated in the numerous examples of what we have referred to as an "embodied intelligence", perceptive consciousness is not diametrically opposed to certain forms of thought (cf. PP 213, VI 29). Moreover, signification and meaning is always, in some form or another, involved in perceptive consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's suggestion is that when the idea of an objective rationality and an objective perception of the world 'out there' are finally dispensed with, what we might see is an intertwining, if not of something that could be termed rational perception, then certainly of thoughtful perception.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty does not intend to suggest that the complicity of body and mind that we see in habitual behaviour implies an absolute awareness of one's own 'subjectivity'[51]. According to him, "there is the absolute certitude of the world in general, but not of anything in particular" (PP 344). Knowing an individual person in a particular manifestation may presuppose an understanding of humanity in its totality, but certainly not any singular motivation for a particular act[52]. This is because lived relations can never be grasped perfectly by consciousness, since the body-subject is not intimately united with consciousness, or entirely present-to-itself. Meaningful behaviour is lived through, rather than thematised and reflected upon, and this ensures that the actions of particular individuals "may be meaningful without them being fully or reflectively aware of the meaning that their action creates or embodies. In this sense, the behaving actor is not a fully-fledged subject in the Cartesian sense. She is not fully transparent to herself"[53]. There is ambiguity then, precisely because we are not capable of disembodied reflection upon our activities, but are involved in an "intentional arc" that absorbs both our body and our mind (PP 136). For Merleau-Ponty, both intellectualism and empiricism presuppose "a universe perfectly explicit in itself" (PP 41), but residing between these

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[51]Perhaps on realising the interdependent complicity of mind and body, we might no longer conspire to make our own lives more difficult by sustaining illusory goals based upon an absolute subject-object distinction and the egoism that this seems to entail. The Western tendency towards individualism and finding oneself by escaping dominant influences is the most obvious example of this.

[52]As a brief aside, is not the ambiguity of the acting person also something that great literature manages to convince us of? Proust has famously stated that all significant art inclines us to the revelation – which for Merleau-Ponty, might typify the human predicament – that what we have just experienced is the same and yet different.

[53]Crossley, N., p 12.

two positions, his body-subject actually requires ambiguity and, in a sense, indeterminacy.

According to Merleau-Ponty, ambiguity prevails both in my perception of things and in the knowledge I have of myself, for a temporal situation cannot but be ambiguous. Indeed, it is because of this temporal alterity that Merleau-Ponty asserts that we can never say 'I' absolutely (PP 208). Rather, he suggests that "I know myself only insofar as I am inherent in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in my ambiguity" (PP 345). Elsewhere in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he implies that the subject is time and time is the subject (PP 431–2), and these sentiments do not appear to be overly dissimilar to Derrida's suggestion that "the movement of *différance* is not something that happens to a transcendental subject; it produces a subject" (SP 82). Admittedly, in Derrida's version of events the subject at least *seems* to be something of a secondary product[54], whereas for Merleau-Ponty, time and the subject are interdependent, but these two philosophers are not obviously antithetical in regard to temporal matters and this will become more apparent in chapter five.

Moreover, as Gary Madison has argued, Merleau-Ponty's attempt to take seriously the notion of ambiguity would, or at least should, also involve the deconstruction of what is termed the 'metaphysics of presence'. This will be explicated in detail in chapter five, but Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon ambiguity – which is the "mark of a thought which is resolutely attempting to overcome oppositional thinking itself"[55] – means that it is not easy to establish that his work is a philosophy of self-certainty, as Foucault and Derrida both claim that phenomenology tends to be[56]. On the contrary, and Barral puts Merleau-Ponty's point well, "since we cannot remain in the alternative of either not understanding the subject, or of knowing nothing about the object, we must seek the object at the very heart of our experience... to understand the paradox that there is a "for-us" of the "in-itself"[57] (cf. PP 71). In other words, we must attain an understanding of what Merleau-Ponty describes elsewhere as "the paradox of transcendence in immanence" (PrP 16) – that is, to understand that objects are given over

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[54]The following chapter will argue that something closer to an interdependence ensues.
[55]Madison, G., "Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?", p 120.
[56]Foucault, M., *The Order of Things*, p xiv. For a more detailed discussion regarding how Merleau-Ponty might be envisaged to avoid Foucault's criticism that he propounds a philosophy of self-certainty, see Crossley, *The Politics of Subjectivity*, p 2–5. The extent to which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can avoid being denigrated as yet another version of the metaphysics of presence is also examined in chapter five.
[57]Barral, M., p 130.

to us, influenced by us, just as we are influenced by the objects that surround us. For Merleau-Ponty, this interdependence and mutual encroachment is evident in all aspects of perception and subjectivity. As he makes clear, "whenever I try to understand myself, the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it come the others who are caught in it" (S 15). To conclude the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty cites de Saint-Exupery: "man is a network of relations" (PP 456), or "man is a knot of relations", depending upon the translation. The strong implication of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that this is not a knot (or network) of the Gordian variety, and that these relations are not something that we can or should want to unravel. The interdependence of the knot is what gives humanity its very qualities, and by dissecting it we risk losing the very thing that establishes us as human.

This point is best explored by Merleau-Ponty when he describes how in writing his philosophical texts he might not necessarily have a precise idea of exactly where his discussion is leading, but "as if by magic" the words flow from him and slowly become a cogent whole (PP 177). This is not to be dismissed as being symptomatic of a supposed 'continental'[58] lack of philosophical rigour. All papers are not entirely worked out in the head before they are laid down. The process of laying them down inevitably effects alterations. Merleau-Ponty embraces this aspect of writing, and he does not consider it merely the derivative attempt to transcribe some self-present thought. With a view to the following chapter, he hence seems to avoid the phonocentric preoccupation with the spoken word that Derrida pervasively associates with the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism (OG 11)[59]. However, there is also the further point that where exactly the written creation derives from (the particular word, as much as the whole book) is a fundamentally ambiguous point for Merleau-Ponty, since it is neither the self-present subject, nor the cultural world, which determines the product, but the knot; the sum relation of all networks.

Again, this necessitates an ambiguity at the heart of our embodied experience

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[58]According to Lester Embree, the term 'continental' was first used by himself in 1978. However, rather than being a simple geographical notion, Embree takes the term to designate philosophers who have paid Husserl's work significant attention, even if they disagree with him (there hence cannot be a 19th century 'continental' thinker, and this includes Nietzsche and Kierkegaard), and who continue to engage with other philosophers who have also interacted with Husserl. See Embree, L., "Husserl as Trunk of the American Continental Tree", in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming 2002).

[59]To some extent, Derrida also endorses this rather positive interpretation of Merleau-Ponty. In his essay "Force and Signification", Derrida cites two quotes from Merleau-Ponty as evidence that meaning must await being either written or spoken in order to inhabit itself (WD 11).

which has some important ethical implications. Trying to discern what is a legitimate authentic project of the self that is not induced by the demands of one's society is infinitely difficult. Indeed, it is not a possibility for Merleau-Ponty, and because of its overtones of an unattainable individualism he refused to use the existential concept of authenticity for his entire career. But he would not want to say that something like, but slightly different from authenticity (ie. a body-subject coming to terms with their own situation in an empowering way) is an impossibility. In many ways, this is a primary ethical demand of his. Finally, however, this ambiguity at the heart of our experience will always be there and an authentic path is not one that we consciously choose by ensuring that we are the only origin of our projects, somehow attempting what he contends is impossible; that is, the transcending of our environment. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's suggestion is that circumstances point us to, and in fact, allow us to find a way (PP 456). The human situation is a product of the 'mind' and our socio-historical situation, and moral achievement is a tenuous embrace of both of these facts.

3. The Deconstruction of Oppositions: Speech-Writing, Mind-Body

Given the vast amounts of literature devoted to the subject, it should not surprise us that Derrida is also preoccupied with undermining the dichotomous tendencies of the philosophical tradition. Almost by definition, dualisms are the staple diet of deconstruction, for without these hierarchies and orders of subordination it would be left with nowhere to intervene. Deconstruction is parasitic in this minimal sense that rather than espousing yet another grand narrative[60], it restricts itself to twisting and distorting already existing narratives, and to revealing the dualistic hierarchies they conceal. Like the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, which almost ubiquitously discerns manifestations of subject-object dichotomies, Derrida is hence occasionally a little reductive when he talks about the Western philosophical tradition of metaphysics. His entire enterprise is predicated upon the conviction that being logocentric, dualisms are irrevocably present in the various philosophers and artisans that he considers. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, however, Derrida does not have quite the same hope for freeing philosophy, or for that matter thought, from the "empirico-transcendental" tendencies of metaphysics. On several occasions Derrida informs us that we cannot completely overcome logocentrism (WD 280), and this is a significant difference between these two theorists regarding what they seek to achieve in their treatments of dichotomy, dualism, and aporia. However, before becoming embroiled in the details of explicating why the combined resources of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida are so valuable for considering the relationship between embodiment and alterity, it is first necessary to ascertain how the notion of embodiment can be thought by deconstruction. This will require considering Derrida in something approaching isolation, although the background that is this thesis' comparative juxtaposition with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty will always be there.

It has, of course, been widely recognised that there are some considerable difficulties involved in contemplating Derrida in terms of embodiment, and the most obvious of these difficulties derives from the simple fact that it is not the type of terrain that he ever explicitly considers in detail. Moreover, the strategic aspects of his work and his consistent use of terms under erasure, or crossed out (as Heidegger so famously did with Being), also complicate any simplistic attribution of a thesis on embodiment to him.

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[60]Lyotard famously characterises the postmodern condition as "incredulity towards grand narratives". See Lyotard, J., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Bennington & Massumi,

If background is still necessary for a thinker whose work has been proliferated so widely (and such an exegesis is also more necessary exactly because of this exposure), Derrida has always tried to avoid becoming a traditional philosopher to whom we can attribute a specific claim about the nature of the world in which we partake. While his claims to being someone who speaks solely in the margins of philosophy can undoubtedly be contested, it is nevertheless important to take these claims into account. Deconstruction is, somewhat infamously, the philosophy that says nothing. To the extent that it can be tentatively suggested that Derrida's concerns are philosophical (and this is a strategic choice, designed to avoid another debate on the intersections of philosophy and literature, philosophy and non-philosophy)[61], they are clearly not phenomenological (he assures us that his early work is to be read specifically against Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) and nor are they ontological.

In comparing him to Merleau-Ponty then, who is variously both phenomenological and ontological, albeit in challenging and new ways, support structures for this thesis are relatively minimal. It is largely for this reason that a systematic analysis of Derrida's relationship with Merleau-Ponty has been deferred until the later stages of this work. Of course, the same type of difficulties also befall any consideration of Derrida in terms of embodiment. Embodiment is a notion that is full of what some would claim are antiquated phenomenological connotations, and it should be clear that in pursuing such lines of thought, this chapter is not reading Derrida in the most obvious way and is doing a certain violence to his texts (as Derrida's own deconstructive readings do). Indeed, contemplating how a notion like embodiment might apply to deconstruction also involves something inherently risky – an attempt to demarcate what deconstruction is. At times, this exegesis will run the risk of ignoring the multifarious and dispersed meanings of Derridean deconstruction, and the widely acknowledged difference between Derrida's early and late work is merely the most obvious example of the difficulties involved in suggesting "deconstruction says this", or "deconstruction

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Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p xxiii.

[61]Rodolphe Gasché in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986) and Christopher Norris in *Derrida* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), were the earliest and most vocal critics of the suggestion that deconstruction was predominantly of relevance to literary theory. Geoffrey Bennington's recent criticisms of Gasché in *Interrupting Derrida* are, however, worth taking on board, as no attempt to philosophise Derrida should avoid taking into account his emphasis upon the messianic and the "perhaps" (PF 38), both of which insist upon retaining an openness towards other possibilities. See Bennington, G., *Interrupting Derrida*, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy, London: Routledge, 2000.

prohibits that". Moreover, nothing would be more antithetical to deconstruction's stated intent than this attempt at defining it through the decidedly metaphysical question "what is deconstruction?". There is an inherent paradoxicality involved in trying to restrict deconstruction to one particular and overarching purpose (OG 19) when it is predicated upon the desire to expose us to that which is wholly other (*tout autre*) and to open us up to alternative possibilities, even if these possibilities are themselves 'impossible'[62].

Such thematics are also the subject of one of Derrida's recent texts, which he co-authored with Geoffrey Bennington. In *Jacques Derrida*, Bennington attempts to pin down the logic of deconstruction, to encapsulate "deconstruction in a nutshell" to borrow the title of one of John Caputo's books[63]. Bennington's text aims at anticipating and accounting for the various different themes that have preoccupied Derrida and deconstruction over the years. Meanwhile, Derrida writes underneath this narrative, and literally attempts to undercut and elude Bennington's efforts at categorising and defining deconstruction. The particular spanner that *Circumfessions* throws in Bennington's works is Derrida's revelation of a secret: that is, his own unholy alliance with Judaism and his "religion without religion" more generally (Circ 154). Derrida's relationship to religion will be examined in chapter nine, but for the moment it is worth acknowledging that this essential elusiveness of deconstruction also means that legitimising the question of embodiment can never be absolute.

That said, it is worth recognising that in his recent work, Derrida is prone to propounding enigmatic suggestions like "go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of coming or going" (ON 75). It seems that it is only the thinking that negotiates with the impossible, and which attempts to transgress given boundaries, that involves any real movement. If there is a sense in which the question of an embodied deconstruction is an impossible transgression of the deconstructive code, it can be pointed out that this has never deterred Derrida, whose own ultimate philosophical aim is "to reopen the power and adventure of the question itself"[64], and it will not deter this thesis.

Moreover, the question of the status of embodiment in Derrida's work will be

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[62]Such apparent incongruities of expression will be considered in depth when this thesis examines Derrida's later writings and his preoccupation with what is termed "possible-impossible" aporias (see chapters five, nine and ten).
[63]Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.
[64]Derrida, J., as cited in Patrick, M., *Derrida, Responsibility, and Politics*, p 5.

raised via an indirect methodology that is not quite so complicit with the metaphysical heritage that his philosophy has always sought to minimise. After examining deconstruction's parasitic relationship with oppositions in detail, particularly via reference to Derrida's famous treatment of the speech-writing opposition, it will be established that his strategies for dealing with dualisms are actually surprisingly consistent. Basically, deconstruction reverses an existing opposition (eg. speech-writing), before then attempting to reveal how that opposition, even with a new privileged term, is already corrupted from within. After having explicated these dual deconstructive strategies, this chapter will briefly examine the extent to which a similar methodology might also apply to the mind-body dualism (and hence, tacitly, to the problem of embodiment).

Introductory remarks aside, it is worth noting that in arguably his most famous work, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida suggests that there is an important correlation between the mind-body problem and the speech-writing hierarchy that is such a major concern of his earlier philosophy (OG 35). Moreover, he also contends that the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible controls metaphysics in its totality (OG 13). Apart from general and allusive comments such as these, however, he accords the mind-body problem that so preoccupies Merleau-Ponty with only relatively cursory attention, and this raises several important questions. Is the body something that is simply antithetical to deconstruction, or has Derrida just never pursued the question? And if not, why not? Our answer to these questions is a complicated one, and it will not even be entirely resolved in this chapter alone, but it will be argued that there is no necessary reason for deconstruction to ignore embodied concerns, at least conceived of in a certain manner. It will also be argued that it is to Derrida's detriment when his work cannot accommodate embodied concerns and the reason(s) that he has so steadfastly avoided writing about such matters (embodiment, existentialia, etc.) will become significant. For the moment, however, it is necessary to consider the consequences that the deconstruction of oppositions might have for a notion like embodiment, and the mind-body problematic.

In this respect, the first task of this chapter will be to ascertain what early deconstruction, and *Of Grammatology* in particular, is trying to achieve through its own persistent relationship with oppositions. While it is unlikely that any stable and positive thesis on embodiment can be inferred from deconstruction, it will be illustrated that the workings of Derrida's deconstructive methodology are certainly of relevance to the mind-

body problematic, as much as to any other hierarchy or dualism.

In regard to deconstruction's treatment of, and interest in oppositions, in his essay "Signature, Event, Context", Derrida has described them thus:

> An opposition of metaphysical concepts (speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to neutralisation: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practise an overturning of the classical opposition, and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticises (M 195).

To understand this dual 'methodology' – that is also, as Rodolphe Gasché has recognised, the deconstruction of the notion of a methodology because it no longer believes in the possibility of an observer being absolutely exterior to the object/text that is being examined[65] – it is helpful to consider an example of this deconstruction at work. As has already been mentioned, the most prominent opposition with which Derrida's earlier work is concerned is that between speech and writing. According to Derrida, thinkers as different as Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss, have all diminished the significance of the written word and valorised speech, by contrast, as some type of pure conduit of meaning. Their argument is basically that spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, whereas written words are the symbols of that already existing symbol, and as representations of speech they are doubly derivative and doubly far from a sacred unity with one's own thought. Without going into detail regarding the specific ways in which all of these thinkers have set about justifying this type of hierarchical opposition (this chapter will soon consider Saussure and Rousseau in some depth), it is important to note that the first strategy of deconstruction is to reverse existing oppositions. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida hence attempts to illustrate that the structure of writing and grammatology are more important and even 'older' than the supposedly pure structure of presence-to-self that is characterised as typical of speech.

For example, in an entire chapter of his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure purports to restrict the science of linguistics to the phonetic and audible word only[66]. In the course of his inquiry, Saussure even goes as far as to argue that "language

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[65]Gasché, R., *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, p 123.
[66]Saussure, F., *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Bally & Sechehaye, trans. Baskin, New York: McGraw-

and writing are two distinct systems of signs: the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first"[67]. Language, he insists, has an oral tradition that is independent of writing, and it is this independence that makes a pure science of speech possible. Derrida vehemently disagrees with this type of hierarchy and instead argues that all that can be claimed of writing – eg. that it is derivative and merely refers to other signs – is equally true of speech. But as well as criticising such a position for certain unjustifiable presuppositions, including the idea that we are self-identical with ourselves in 'hearing' ourselves think, Derrida also makes explicit the manner in which such a hierarchy is rendered untenable from within Saussure's own text.

Most famously, Saussure is the proponent of the thesis that is commonly referred to as "the arbitrariness of the sign", and this asserts, to simplify matters considerably, that the signifier bears no necessary or intrinsic relationship to that which is signified. Saussure derives numerous consequences from this position, most of which are not overly relevant to our purposes, but as Derrida points out, this notion of arbitrariness and of "unmotivated institutions" of signs would seem to deny the possibility of any natural attachment (OG 44). After all, if the sign is arbitrary and hence eschews any foundational reference to reality, it would seem that a certain type of sign (ie. the spoken) could not be more natural than another (ie. the written). However, it is precisely this idea of a natural attachment that Saussure relies upon to argue for our "natural bond" with sound[68], and his suggestion that sounds are more intimately related to our thoughts than the written word hence runs counter to his fundamental principle regarding the arbitrariness of the sign. Saussure's work is considered in greater depth in the following chapter, but it is worth explicating a few other key points from Derrida's early work that reaffirm that deconstruction's first strategic move is one of reversal.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida also suggests that signification, broadly conceived, always refers to other signs, and that one can never reach a sign that refers only to itself. He argues that "writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true" (OG 43), and this process of infinite referral, of never arriving at meaning itself, is the notion of 'writing' that he wants to emphasise. This is not writing narrowly conceived, as in a literal inscription upon a page, but what he terms 'arche-writing'. Arche-writing refers to a more generalised notion of writing that insists

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Hill, 1966, p 24.
[67]Saussure, F., p 23.

that the breach that the written introduces between what is intended to be conveyed and what is actually conveyed, is typical of an originary breach that afflicts everything one might wish to keep sacrosanct, including the notion of self-presence.

This originary breach that arche-writing refers to can be artificially separated out to reveal two claims regarding spatial differing and temporal deferring. To explicate the first of these related claims, Derrida's emphasis upon how writing differs from itself is simply to suggest that writing, and by extension all repetition, is split (differed) by the absence that makes it necessary, and one example of this might be that we write something down because we may soon forget it, or to communicate something to someone who is not with us. According to Derrida, all writing, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the absence of every empirically determined addressee (M 375).

Derrida also considers deferral to be typical of the written and this is to reinforce that the meaning of a certain text is never present, never entirely captured by a critic's attempt to pin it down, and this applies as much to Bennington's efforts as it does to this thesis. The meaning of a text is constantly subject to the whims of the future, but when that so-called future is itself 'present' (if we are to try and circumscribe the future by reference to a specific date or event) its meaning is equally not realised, but subject to yet another future that can never be present. The key to a text is never even present to the author themselves, for the written always defers its meaning, and as a consequence we cannot simply ask Derrida to explain exactly what he meant by propounding that enigmatic sentiment that has been controversially translated as "there is nothing outside of the text" (OG 158)[69]. Any explanatory words that he may deign to offer would themselves require further explication, for of necessity, in this temporal space, myriad interpretations will always be possible. So, Derrida's more generalised notion of writing, arche-writing, refers to the way in which the written is possible only on account of this 'originary' deferral of meaning that ensures that meaning can never actually be definitively present. In conjunction with the differing aspect that we have already seen

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[68]Saussure, F., p 25.

[69]There are those who argue, with good reason, that the French *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* is more accurately translated as "there is no outside of the text". Since he first coined this aphorism, Derrida has also spent a lot of time reformulating its meaning, and he has suggested that it is more accurately translated as "there is no outside of context" (cf. 'Afterword', LI 136–7). Of course, engendering controversy may have been Derrida's strategic intent in initially endorsing the "there is nothing outside of the text" translation, and if that was the case then he definitely succeeded.

him associate with, and then extend beyond the traditional confines of writing, he will come to describe these two overlapping processes via that most famous of neologisms: *différance*.

Différance is an attempt to conjoin the differing and deferring aspects involved in arche-writing in a term that itself plays upon the distinction between the audible and the written. After all, what differentiates *différance* and *différence* is inaudible, and this means that distinguishing between them actually requires the written. This problematises efforts like Saussure's, which as well as attempting to keep speech and writing apart, also suggest that writing is a secondary and almost unnecessary addition to speech. In response to such a claim, Derrida can simply point out that there is often, and perhaps even always, this type of ambiguity in the spoken word – *différence* as compared to *différance* – that demands recourse to the written. Rather than speech being primordial, it necessarily requires the written to function properly. The spoken is hence always at a distance from any supposed clarity of a monological consciousness, and it is this originary breach that Derrida associates with the terms arche-writing and *différance*.

Of course, *différance* cannot be exhaustively defined in any satisfactory manner and this is largely because of Derrida's insistence that it is "neither a word, nor a concept", as well as the fact that the meaning of the term changes depending upon the particular context in which it is being employed. For the moment, however, it suffices to suggest that according to Derrida, *différance* is typical of what is involved in arche-writing and this generalised notion of writing that breaks down the entire logic of the sign (OG 7). The widespread conviction that the sign literally represents something, which even if not actually present, could be potentially present, is rendered impossible by arche-writing, which insists that signs always refer to yet more signs *ad infinitum*, and that there is no ultimate referent or foundation. One could even extend the applicability of arche-writing and *différance* to that most unpopular of terms in the modern philosophical vernacular – experience. Derrida dislikes the term 'experience' because it is "unwieldy and metaphysical", but if we think of "experience as arche-writing" (OG 60–1), he assures us that this is a different matter, and it too is subject to the same *différance*, or dehiscence, for which writing, narrowly conceived, has often been disparaged.

Such sentiments will be analysed in greater detail throughout this chapter, but this reversal of the subordinated term (writing) accomplishes the first of deconstruction's dual strategic intents. Rather than being derivative, writing, or at least the processes that

characterise writing (ie. *différance* and arche-writing), are ubiquitous. Just as a piece of writing has no self-present subject to explain what every particular word means (and this ensures that what is written must partly elude any individual's attempt to control it), this is equally typical of the spoken. Utilising the same structure of repetition, nothing guarantees that the other will endow the words I use with the particular meaning that I attribute to them. Even the conception of an internal monologue and the idea that we can intimately 'hear' our own thoughts in a non-contingent way is misguided, as it ignores the way that arche-writing privileges difference and a non-coincidence with oneself.

Without digressing in this regard, in his book *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida discusses the Husserlian emphasis upon intuition and argues that the presentation of meaning, even to oneself, is always haunted by its possible repetition or reproduction (SP 68). This implies, as one commentator has recognised, that "the now could never be recognised as such, if each experience of the now exhausted itself in the experience and left no trace"[70]. A trace is hence necessary, and this residue of a previous experience precludes us ever being present to ourselves in a self-contained 'now' moment. The identity of the now is dependent upon a non-identity: it can only repeat itself by differing from itself, and this means that arche-writing and the deferred temporality that is involved in it are not just an exception to the rule, but in fact, are the rule.

Derrida's criticisms of the Husserlian 'now' moment will be considered in more detail in chapter five, but for the moment it is important to highlight that this reversing aspect of the deconstructive strategy is clearly also applicable to the mind-body dualism. After all, it can be cogently argued that everything that the body can be denigrated for, such as a reliance upon the transience of the senses, is equally applicable to the workings of any ephemeral realm of the 'mental'. To pose the problem in terms more closely aligned with Merleau-Ponty's project, there is no obvious reason why a hypothetical deconstruction should not highlight that everything that one might attempt to privilege as the 'mental' always implies the body, and is inconceivable without it. A deconstructive reversal of the mind-body hierarchy might even emphasise something tantamount to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject, where the previously subordinated term of the opposition – eg. the body – is restored, albeit in a modified form (the body-subject), as the privileged term. Indeed, such a reversal would seem to be structurally isomorphic

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[70]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, p 47.

with the transition that Derrida's notion of writing makes when instead of being merely a derivative addition to speech, it is actually revealed as partaking in arche-writing. At the very least, a mind-body dualism is clearly susceptible to the first strategy of deconstruction (eg. reversal) and why Derrida rarely sought to reverse this particular hierarchy hence remains an issue that is worth examining.

In this respect, however, it needs to be pointed out that all of deconstruction's reversals (arche-writing included) are partly captured by the edifice that they seek to overthrow. For Derrida, "one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it" (OG 24), and it is hence important to recognise that the mere reversal of an existing metaphysical opposition might not also challenge the governing framework and presuppositions that are attempting to be reversed (WD 280). Deconstruction hence cannot rest content with merely prioritising writing over speech (or body over mind), but must also accomplish the second major aspect of deconstruction's dual strategies, that being to corrupt and contaminate the opposition itself. Without yet considering the significant differences between Derrida's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical projects – ie. stylistically, methodologically, etc. – it is worth pre-emptively suggesting that Merleau-Ponty's final chiasmic ontology can also be envisaged as highlighting that dualisms are always already corrupted. Indeed, forthcoming chapters will argue this in detail.

However, before explicating how deconstruction reveals that existing oppositions are necessarily corrupted, it is worth mentioning that despite Derrida's use of scare quotes and consistent warnings against interpreting his reversals in a transcendental manner, his philosophy frequently verges on propounding transcendental and metaphysical arguments. Even if one agrees with him that it is necessary to go through transcendental arguments rather than merely bypassing them (OG 50) as Wittgenstein arguably does in his own 'deconstruction' of the philosophical tradition[71], in scrupulously written texts Derrida speaks of "*original* dispersion" (OG 232). More famously, he has also suggested that *différance* is "*older*" than Heidegger's ontological difference (SP 154), and as Richard Rorty has pointed out, it is difficult to know what to make of concepts such as 'older' that are precariously poised next to affirmations of primordiality

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[71]In his book, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Henry Staten details Wittgenstein and Derrida's decidedly different deconstructions of the tradition. While Derrida proposes a more thorough and respectful relation to the metaphysical tradition, according to Staten, Wittgenstein hopes to do away with this necessity altogether. See Staten, H., *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984.

and other such transcendental arguments[72]. David Wood also criticises this aspect of Derrida's work and cites several quotes where *différance* is described as *constituting* and as an *origin*[73]. The point of this foray into a rather large body of literature regarding just how transcendental Derrida's work is, is to highlight that although Derrida regularly reverses many of the different oppositions that have plagued the Western philosophical tradition, this does not automatically ensure that he succeeds in corrupting these oppositions from within. If his various reversals are not undermined sufficiently by the second deconstructive strategy of corrupting the entire opposition, then he risks being yet another transcendental philosopher who simply swaps everything that metaphysics has valorised for its opposite.

The tension between these dual aspects of a deconstructive intervention will become more important when alterity is considered in the second half of this thesis, but it should be apparent that Derrida must highlight that the categories that sustain and safeguard any dualism are always already disrupted and displaced. To effect this second aspect of deconstruction's strategic intents, Derrida usually coins a new term, or reworks an old one, to permanently disrupt the structure into which he has intervened – examples of this include his discussion of the pharmakon in Plato (drug or tincture, salutary or maleficent), and the supplement in Rousseau, which will be considered towards the end of this chapter. Moreover, according to Derrida, the basis for this disruption is to be found within the system that he is criticising itself. Deconstruction contends that in any text, there are inevitably points of equivocation and 'undecidability' that betray any stable meaning or thesis that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text. The process of writing always reveals that which has been suppressed, covers over that which has been disclosed, and more generally breaches the very oppositions that are thought to sustain it. This is why Derrida's 'philosophy' is so textually based and it is also why his key terms are always changing, because depending upon who or what he is seeking to deconstruct, that point of equivocation and 'undecidability' – which he sometimes refers to as the neglected and yet pivotal cornerstone of the house (MDM 75, 79) – will always be located in a different place.

To phrase the problem in slightly different terms, Derrida's argument is that in examining a binary opposition, deconstruction manages to reveal a trace. This is not a

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[72]Rorty, R., "Deconstruction and Circumvention" in *Critical Inquiry* 11, September 1984, p 17.
[73]Wood, D., *The Deconstruction of Time*, Contemporary Studies in Philosophy and the Human Sciences,

trace of the oppositions that have since been deconstructed – on the contrary, the trace is a rupture within metaphysics, a pattern of incongruities where the metaphysical rubs up against the non-metaphysical, that it is deconstruction's job to juxtapose as best as it can[74]. The trace does not appear as such (OG 65), but somehow the logic of its path in a text can be mimed by a deconstructive intervention and hence brought to the fore. The problem for translating this into a notion of embodiment is that the trace withdraws from sight, and to consider it according to the phenomenological dictum of describing that which *appears* to consciousness would be to ignore many of the trace's more prescient and defining features.

Nevertheless, one important aim of this thesis will be to analyse the extent to which when we deconstruct the speech-writing opposition, and by implication, when we deconstruct the mind-body problem that Derrida says is largely correlative (OG 35), the trace that is revealed can be considered as having ramifications for a conception of embodiment that also wants to avoid the dualistic bifurcations of presence and absence. Of course, discerning exactly what type of ramifications this might have for embodiment will be no easy task, and Derrida has consistently warned us against attempting this type of project, most obviously in *Speech and Phenomena* (SP 75, 104, 154), but invariably in virtually all of his texts. David Wood has also insisted that there can be no phenomenology of the trace[75], and this thesis will not simply ignore Derrida's anti-phenomenological bent.

However, it is partly the frequency of, and intensity with which Derrida declares himself absolved of phenomenology, that makes us (and Lévinas[76]) all the more suspicious. In *Of Grammatology*, he intriguingly states that "a thought of the trace can no more break with a transcendental phenomenology than be reduced to it" (OG 62, cf. SP 154). To provide some context, this comment is Derrida's attempt to acknowledge that Husserl's philosophical schema accords non-presentation with as equally originary a role as he accords presentation. Derrida hence admits that what does not present itself, or that

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Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1989, p 274.

[74]Harvey, I., *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

[75]Wood, D., *The Deconstruction of Time*, p 271. It seems to me, however, that such a position relies upon an overly literal definition of phenomenology, and as Wood is himself well aware, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology no longer adheres in any simple way to the Husserlian reduction.

[76]Simon Critchley cites an interesting comment by Lévinas suggesting that Derrida's treatment of phenomenology has been schematic, and that phenomenology has consequently always threatened to return and haunt Derrida. For an understanding of Lévinas' arguments in this respect, see Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Lévinas and Derrida*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p 160.

which eludes the grasp of presence (eg. *différance*, although it is worth pointing out that *différance* equally eludes the non-grasp of absence[77]), is not rendered secondary. In that sense at least, Husserl is not considered to be committing the metaphysical mistake *par excellence* of subordinating one term of a dualism to the other[78]. The implication of this is that there is a way, or at least might be a way, in which phenomenology can avoid the metaphysics of presence. However, Derrida insists that to pose the problem in terms of a choice between the trace/supplement/*différance* as aligned with a certain phenomenology, or as a rupture within phenomenology, is "to confuse very different levels, paths and styles" (OG 62). What is interesting is that he wants to keep phenomenology somehow external to the considerations of his text, even where he acknowledges something tantamount to complicity. Everything else in *Of Grammatology* is about breaching the purity of such 'outsides', contaminating Saussure's distinction between phone and gramme with this notion of arche-writing. It is curious then, that 'writing' itself, the germ of contamination, might preclude yet another contamination – eg. the phenomenological contamination, and the contamination of the body more generally.

This chapter intends to breach this purity, but the obvious question then becomes why, and for what reasons must Derrida's work be considered in terms of the body at all? One important reason is because his treatment of embodiment and what we must elsewhere infer a deconstructive treatment to be, will also have correlative repercussions on the way that Derrida can thematise the question of alterity. The way that we conceive of our embodied situation almost invariably influences how we think about alterity. This is not to suggest that the other is reducible to the self, but that the divergence and yet simultaneous dependence of mind and body is similar to – and even chiasmically intertwined with – the divergence and yet surreptitious betrothal of self and other. Establishing that, however, is very much a longitudinal concern, and the connections between these two guiding themes of this thesis – embodiment and the other – will become clearer as we progress.

More immediately, this chapter will attempt to establish Derrida's significance for

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[77]Rodolphe Gasché has consistently emphasised that *différance* cannot be simply taken as emblematic of absence, or certainly not as an absence that is susceptible of determination. It is rather, an "infrastructure" that is anterior to such oppositional notions, and that cannot be recuperated dialectically. See Gasché, R., *The Tain of the Mirror*, p 103.

[78]Of course, Derrida has expressed many reservations regarding Husserl throughout his career, and most famously in his discontent with Husserlian temporality and its reliance upon the notion of intuition (cf. SP).

questions pertaining to embodiment because of an abiding belief that it is a thematic that he could and should have pursued further, and it need not necessarily be along the lines of the existentialism that he has so despised. There are several reasons why I think that he should have pursued it further, the most obvious of these being that although the denigration of writing is widespread in the philosophical tradition, it does not seem to be quite as endemic as the servility to which the body has been consigned. A deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition, which must also inhabit that metaphysical tradition (OG 24), must surely accord more attention to this problematic than it has thus far.

Moreover, much remains to be considered in issues regarding embodiment and Derrida has himself admitted this[79]. In *The Gift of Death*'s evocative contemplation of the supreme Abrahamic sacrifice, Derrida ponders the tremble, the quiver, and the strange association that they bear to an unknown that nevertheless becomes palpable in these very agitations. According to him, the tremble is completely irrepressible and exhibits a symptomatology that is as "enigmatic as tears" (GD 55). This reference to tears would seem to preclude us daring to suggest that this symptomatology might be a phenomenology, for tears divest the eyes of their traditional phenomenological import – seeing[80]. However, Derrida does suggest that in order to begin to understand our quiver (and surely this is not the only symptom deserving of such attention) much about our bodies remains to be considered. In one rather long sentence, he contends that:

> We would need to make new inroads into thinking concerning the body, without disassociating the registers of discourse (thought, philosophy, the bio-genetic – psychoanalytic sciences, phylo and onto genesis), in order to one day come closer to what makes us tremble or what makes us cry, to that cause which is not the final cause that can be called God or Death (God is the cause of the *mysterium tremendum*, and the death that is given is always what makes us tremble, or what makes us weep as well) but to a closer cause; not the immediate cause, that is, the

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[79]In his essay, "*Le Toucher*: Touch/to touch him", Derrida also mentions the importance of embodied issues. His analysis of the thematic of touching, as it appears in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, accords a certain priority to the sense of touch, but it also reveals a necessary breaching, or synaesthesia of the senses, in that the problem that Derrida poses at the beginning of this essay is: "when our *eyes touch*, is it day or is it night? (*my italics*)". See Derrida, J., "*Le Toucher*: Touch/to touch him" in *Paragraph*, 16:2, 1993, p 122–57.

[80]In chapter five, it will be illustrated that Derrida thinks that the eyes are importantly blind, and the tears that he also associates with the eyes can only exacerbate this paradoxical blindness. This reaffirms John Caputo's interpretation of Derrida, in which he suggests that the eyes are more for imploring than exploring, doing 'truth' rather than observing, "not seeing but sighing, not perception but prayer" (see Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, p

> accident or circumstance, but the cause closest to our body, that which means that one trembles or weeps rather than doing something else (GD 55).

This stated intent to think of the body without succumbing to a final cause, or an immediate cause, seems closely related to Merleau-Ponty's attempts to avoid the twin metaphysical tendencies of intellectualism and empiricism. Moreover, part of achieving this rethinking of the body without "disassociating registers of discourse", that is, without thinking of the body merely empirically, will be to establish the extent to which Derrida's work, like Merleau-Ponty's, can also be relevant to such a project.

Even in *The Gift of Death* itself, Derrida insightfully, if also rather aphoristically, suggests that we tremble because of the disproportion between death as affirming our own singularity, and death as also making us responsible for an infinite gift. We tremble in the face of the aporia that exists between these two competing demands: the first of these demands is communal and ethical, in that death opens us to something that is wholly other (an alterity that subtends our own individual existence); and yet given that our death can never actually be undergone by another for us, there is also a demand of radical singularity (GD 56). We tremble in the recognition that neither of these demands can ever be entirely assuaged and also because of a tacit recognition that whichever direction we may incline towards, that 'undecidable' decision can never be wholly justified (GD 70)[81]. Returning to the problem at hand, it should be clear from these type of comments that considering Derrida in terms pertaining to the body is a coherent and worthwhile project that need not be diametrically opposed to his own philosophical intents.

Moreover, it is worth reaffirming that the ethico-religious ideal of the body as subordinated to the mind, or the body as a mere 'handmaiden' of consciousness, parallels the speech-writing hierarchy and even almost inevitably accompanies it. Derrida hints at this type of correlation when he equates Saussure's repudiation of the written with the denial of embodied passion and sensibility that he suggests typifies the theologians of sin (OG 37–8). According to Derrida, Saussure's argument hinges on interpreting the written, the body, and also the passions, as immoral and a deviation from nature (eg. the "natural" bond of sound). When Saussure decries the "tyranny" of writing that distorts and contorts the pronunciation of words, he is, according to Derrida at least, expressing

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327 & 334).

[81]The notion of undecidability is examined in detail in chapter six.

his discontent with the body for usurping the rightful privilege of the soul (OG 38).

Now, given this discussion of deconstruction's strategies in regard to opposition, and some ways in which they could be satisfactorily applied to the mind-body problem, one important question still remains to be answered – exactly what type of consequences might the deconstruction of the mind-body problem have for a notion like embodiment? To briefly sketch an answer, although this answer is predictably negative in its formulation, then clearly the body cannot be considered in any way that makes the linguistic extrinsic to it. Derrida has insisted that everything is subject to *différance* and 'arche-writing' in the broad sense. From this it can be discerned, somewhat axiomatically, that there is no pure self-presence, or locus of self-certainty to be found in the body for Derrida (although nor does Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body require this). Derrida objects to the metaphysical opposition between presence and absence above all else, and a body, conceived of in deconstructive terms, is clearly not something that can be simplistically characterised as in the domain of presence.

Of course, in considering the relationship that obtains between deconstruction and embodiment it should not be ignored that the most pervasive interpretation of Derrida is still the one that relies upon famous and readily circulable statements such as "there is nothing outside of the text". The following chapter contains an extended analysis of this famous provocation, but for the moment it suffices to observe that critics propounding this type of interpretation are generally linguistically focused, and trace the debt that deconstruction owes to Saussurean linguistics and its emphasis upon the arbitrariness of the sign. While Gasché and Bennington, among others, have attempted to redress this treatment, it is still common, and those proposing this less sympathetic reading of Derrida envisage a textualising of the notion of the body that precludes it being considered in any manner other than linguistic.

For the particular purposes of this thesis, it is worth reaffirming that this is the type of interpretation of Derrida propounded by many of those theorists writing at the intersection of his thought with Merleau-Ponty. I am referring to the collections entitled *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*[82], and *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*[83], and the most obvious problem with these essays is a fairly united reading of Derrida as a semiological reductionist who

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[82]Dillon, M., ed. *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing.*
[83]Busch, T., & Gallagher, S., eds. *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism.*

deliberately reduces embodied meaning to the linguistic[84]. Many of these essays are written by avowed "Merleau-Pontyians" (not that this is a bad thing!) who intend to affirm a disparity and discordance between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, and more often than not, precisely in order to discredit Derrida by comparison to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

Martin Dillon is one contributor who rehearses such an argument in his introductory essay for *Écart and Différance*[85], and in his book *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*[86]. He also writes another book perpetuating such a line of thought, bluntly titled *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought*. Dillon's fundamental contention is that Derrida in fact coins a new dualism, one side of which (the body and sensation) is rendered inaccessible[87]. Dillon's charge of semiological reductionism is not a new or particularly innovative interpretation of Derrida. Indeed, it is clear that Dillon's arguments cannot simply be dismissed, even if at certain points they fail in their reading of Derrida, because they are grounded in something of a scholarly consensus. Derrida himself has been bemused by the frequency of derisive accusations of linguistic idealism. Reflecting on one such interpretation, he asserts that:

> It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the 'other' of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all the search for the 'other' and the 'other' of language[88].

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[84]This chapter will take issue with Martin Dillon's interpretation of Derrida as a semiological reductionist, but he is far from being alone in making such accusations. Among others, articles by Gary Madison, Patrick Burke and Leonard Lawlor also seem culpable in this regard. In his essay, "Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: *La DifférEnce*", Madison argues that, for Derrida, "the world is nothing more than a semiological construct, a purely intralinguistic affair" (*Écart and Différance*, p 95). Burke and Lawlor maintain that Derrida introduces a new binary opposition (*Écart and Différance*, p 63), and a dualism that severs the linguistic from the perceptual (*Écart and Différance*, p 72). Fortunately, however, there are exceptions to this tendency, and most particularly in relation to Hugh Silverman's essay, "Between Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism", which can be found in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

[85]Dillon, M., "Introduction" in *Écart and Différance*, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, p 1–18.

[86]Dillon, M., *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, p 175–6.

[87]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 3.

[88]Derrida, J., in an interview with Kearney, R., "Deconstruction and the Other: Dialogue with Derrida" in *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester:

Coming from Derrida, this is quite an affirmative statement. He does not merely suggest that the criticism posed by Dillon, among other theorists, is incorrect and ignores the fact that he is usually quite careful to disassociate himself from such a position. Derrida makes the stronger claim that his philosophy propounds the exact opposite position. Exactly what this could mean will become clearer as this thesis progresses, but it certainly should not be suggested that Derrida's philosophy allows unmediated access to this other of language through reflection, intuition, or any other medium via which metaphysics has generally enabled the approximation to 'truth'. Attempting to grasp the other of language in language, can and should be a paradoxical activity. This is why Derrida has long been fascinated by negative theology (and also the Lévinasian distinction between the Saying and the Said) and its strange attempt to bear witness to God without language and without the name, since such tools risk divesting the religious experience of exactly what it is that the notion of God would be attempting to communicate[89]. There is no easy answer to Dillon's discontent with the deconstructive suggestion that the other of language is consistently being effaced by language, but it can be pointed out that the mere existence of this paradox does not necessarily deny us access to this other of language, and it certainly does not show that Derrida ignores the other of language. On the contrary, his later philosophy calls for nothing but the wholly other (*tout autre*) that breaches the imperialism of the same, language included[90].

However, the main mistake of those accusing Derrida of semiological reductionism is to presume that the other of language must be an embodied immediacy that does without signification. For Derrida, the other of language is not the body. On the contrary, Derrida suggests that the problem of writing as subordinated by speech, and the problem of the body as subordinated by the mind, are a similar problem (cf. OG 35). The body is hence not simply the 'outside' which hides a secret, interior truth of subjectivity within, and the consequences of this idea will be examined in the following chapter's

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Manchester University Press, 1984, p 123.

[89]To simplify, the Lévinasian distinction between the Saying and the Said is an attempt to distinguish between a sensible and corporeal exposure to the other (the Saying), and the attempt to put that exposure into words (the Said). This problem of how the Said might be able to best convey the Saying would seem to share some similarities with a constitutive problem of negative theology in regard to how one might go about testifying to a mystical exposure to God within a language that can never adequately capture that experience itself. For a more detailed account of Derrida's interactions with negative theology, see Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 146, Hart, K., *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, and Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction.*

[90]This notion of the wholly other (*tout autre*) is examined in chapters nine and ten.

discussion of the work of Vicki Kirby. Moreover, by claiming that Derrida bases his entire analysis upon reducing the so-called 'externalities' (including the perceptual) to the linguistic, Dillon also ignores Derrida's fundamental claim to restructuring the entire concept of the sign and, by implication, language. Dillon must hence argue that the notion of the trace and arche-writing are an ineffectual play on words – a subterfuge designed to obscure Derrida's more traditional philosophical project, which he contends is a linguistic idealism. Of course, in its stated ambitions exactly what deconstruction does not want to do, is to try and effect this type of reduction. On the contrary, it is designed to open questions up to a multiplicity of perspectives, not to recreate the phenomenological reduction in linguistic guise. As Merleau-Ponty has informed us, the only thing that the phenomenological reduction has taught us is the impossibility of just such a reduction (PP xiv)[91], and even though Derrida has repeatedly acknowledged Husserl as a major influence, he would clearly agree. He is not, as Dillon provocatively suggests, "employing a methodology of reduction and idealism, like his primary mentor, Husserl"[92].

While Dillon has no major problem with Derrida's analysis of language, at least insofar as it applies only to language, he points out that when Derrida extends his discussion of such matters onto the body and more phenomenological concerns in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida nevertheless begins his argument with the statement "when I use words" (SP 50). According to Dillon, this does not get at visual and embodied responses to a situation that do not require words[93], and can involve an original presentation rather than a mere representation. Dillon contends that presence to meaning need not require signs at all, as if the whole edifice of Derridean deconstruction falls apart on this suggestion.

Without entertaining this claim that, for Derrida, meaning exists only in language, it seems to me that this difference between meaning and apprehension, and many of the related aporias that Derrida discerns in representation, need not be restricted to language alone. Does not the same divergence (*écart*) exist within a situation conceived more

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[91]Of course, this is a complicated statement that does not automatically entail a rejection of phenomenology. According to Jeffrey Bell (and I think he is correct), "the failure of the phenomenological reduction is not, for Merleau-Ponty, a sign of phenomenology's inadequacy, but the recognition of a fundamental experience that is the condition for the natural attitude" (see Bell, J., *The Problem of Difference: Phenomenology and Poststructuralism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998, p 119).
[92]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 50.
[93]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 42.

phenomenologically? This possibility will be examined in greater detail throughout this thesis and through reference to the divergence that Merleau-Ponty discerns between the sentient and the sensible, but there seems to be no compelling reason why this would not be the case. Iterability alters (LI 200), but the point is that the various structures of iterability are not the sole domain of language. It is precisely this absolute opposition that Derrida wants to place in question. Why then, does Dillon refuse to consider that Derrida's attempted complication of the notion of the sign might well have interesting consequences for the notion of the body? It would prohibit any transparent presence-to-self, but it might also involve a productive redefinition of what it is to be embodied that would reinstall us in the ambiguity of our situation. At the very least, there seems to be no convincing reason to presume that it would, necessarily, be opposed to that paradoxical and internally divergent situatedness that Dillon's inspiration, Merleau-Ponty, thematises.

Preoccupied with proving that Derrida installs an absolute bar between the significance of the seen and its referent, the indefinitely deferred transcendental signified, Dillon contends that deconstruction "has the consequence of denying to perceptual objects any meaning beyond that conferred by signifiers" and he rhetorically asks of Derrida, "why can't we smell, touch, etc?"[94]. This claim that Derrida somehow forbids all reference to touching, smelling, etc., seems to me to be a significant falsification of his deconstructive intent. Admittedly, early deconstruction does accord some priority to the various formal structures of language over the language user. The written word, the grammatological, and even linguistics generally, are all emphasised, and Derrida also insists that signs, or at least his reworked definition of what a sign might be, are a prerequisite for meaning of all kinds. Much of the terrain traditionally considered phenomenological has also been consigned to the dustbin, but it needs to be pointed out that this decision to pursue other lines of questioning is not the same thing as attempting a sustained philosophical reduction and the collapsing of one term into its other.

Given Derrida's challenging of the traditional notion of the sign, we may be more inclined to agree with Bennington's suggestion that Derrida's insistence that the sign is at the beginning, "will imply very rapidly that there is no beginning, thing or sign"[95]. It opens all of these notions up to alternative formulations, rather than making the

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[94]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 77–8.
[95]Bennington, G., *Jacques Derrida*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p 24.

phenomenal thing somehow inert before the all-encompassing power of the sign. If text, for Derrida, includes everything (OG 158, LI 136), then it seems permissible to suggest that repetition and all of the aporias that govern it are also 'perceptual' and 'experiential', although in a manner that transgresses our sense of what encloses and identifies these terms[96]. On this type of interpretation, his emphasis upon "signification" is designed to suggest that a certain spatio-temporal movement that he terms *différance* makes (im)possible signification and sensibility in any of its myriad forms.

Instead of considering such possibilities, the semiological reductionist argument reinstalls the very binary oppositions that Derrida is trying to displace, by refusing to consider the ways in which *différance* is not merely sign dependent, but is an "infrastructure" underneath the entire signifier/signified relationship[97], that in turn also reveals the fragility of this very opposition. It must be remembered that deconstruction is not merely the simple reversal of the privileging of speech over writing, and of the signifier over what is signified. It wants to reveal how such oppositions are always already corrupted, and critics who argue that Derrida cannot be considered in terms of embodiment ignore this second major aspect of the deconstructive strategy. Admittedly, it has been suggested that Derrida himself occasionally forgets the importance of this second aspect of the deconstructive intervention, and that his reversals hence sometimes verge on legitimising transcendental claims. Elsewhere some concerns will be expressed about this tendency (see chapter nine), but the point remains that the accusation that Derrida privileges the linguistic signifier almost entirely ignores the notions of *différance* and arche-writing that this chapter has begun to elucidate.

Moreover, such an accusation also ignores the logic of the supplement that is an important aspect of *Of Grammatology*. This text's vastly different discussions of Saussure and Rousseau, of arche-writing and the supplement, are united by the fact that both of them explicitly preclude their significance being confined solely to the realm of the linguistic. In attempting to illustrate this, it is worth recognising that the supplement is something which, allegedly secondarily, comes to serve as an aid to something 'original' or 'natural'. Writing is itself an example of this structure, for as Derrida points

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[96]In this respect, it is worth recalling Gary Madison's insistence that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception also transgresses our traditional sense of what identifies this term (see Madison, G., "Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?", p 83). For Merleau-Ponty, perception is always interconnected with action and habitual motility.
[97]Gasché, R., *The Tain of the Mirror*, p 103.

out, "if supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement *par excellence* since it proposes itself as the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant" (OG 281). Another example of the supplement might be masturbation, as Derrida suggests (OG 153), or even the use of birth control precautions. What is notable about both of these examples, is a certain ambiguity that ensures that which is supplementary can always be interpreted in two ways. For example, our society's use of birth control precautions might be interpreted as tacitly suggesting that our natural way is lacking and that the contraceptive pill, or condom, etc., hence replaces a fault in nature. On the other hand, it might also be argued that such precautions merely add on to, and enrich our natural way. It is always ambiguous, or more accurately 'undecidable', whether the supplement adds itself and "is a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence", or whether "the supplement supplements… adds only to replace… represents and makes an image… its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (OG 144). Ultimately, Derrida suggests that the supplement is both of these things, accretion and substitution (OG 200), which means that the supplement is "not a signified more than a signifier, a representer than a presence, a writing than a speech" (OG 315). It comes before all such modalities, and for Derrida, there can hence be no simple reduction to one term (eg. the image, or the linguistic).

It should also be highlighted that this is not just some rhetorical suggestion that has no concrete significance in deconstruction, as Dillon claims[98]. Indeed, while Rousseau consistently laments the frequency of his masturbation in his book, *The Confessions*, Derrida argues that "it has never been possible to desire the presence 'in person', before this play of substitution and the symbolic experience of auto-affection" (OG 154). By this, Derrida means that this supplementary masturbation that 'plays' between presence and absence (eg. the image of the absent Therese that is evoked by Rousseau) is that which allows us to conceive of being present and fulfilled in sexual relations with another at all. In a sense, masturbation is 'originary', and according to Derrida, this situation applies to all sexual relations. Hetero-eroticism has its own supplementary protection in which we are never present to some ephemeral 'meaning' of sexual relations, but always involved in some form of representation. Even if this does

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[98]Dillon does not accord the notion of the supplement much exegetical space, but he does argue that Derrida's references to the other of language play no concrete role in his work. See Dillon, M.,

not literally take the form of imagining another in the place of, or supplementing the 'presence' that is currently with us, and even if we are not always acting out a certain role, or faking certain pleasures, for Derrida, such representations and images are the very conditions of desire and of enjoyment. But he is in no way simplistically exalting the image, the represented and simulated version of sexual relations as exemplified by auto-affection. Derrida's point is that all sexual relations, and all subjectivity, are typified by this type of supplementarity that cannot be adequately characterised in terms of presence or absence, signifier or signified (OG 156).

This digression into the logic of the supplement has aimed to provide further reasons for doubting the veracity of the semiological reductionist interpretation. Like his notion of arche-writing, Derrida's exploration of the problem of the supplement explicitly precludes its significance being confined solely to the linguistic, the image, or any other equivalent side of a dichotomy. Instead, these two pivotal notions from *Of Grammatology* emphasise an interdependence and also a breaching of categories like inner and outer, accretion and substitution, and this is characteristic of deconstruction's strategies in regard to dualisms generally. As yet, we have also seen no convincing reason to presume that this simultaneous interdependence and breaching of categories could not be relevantly applied to an analysis of embodiment. After all, Merleau-Ponty has emphasised the paradoxical status of the body-subject, which is simultaneously both subject and object, and forthcoming chapters will accord more significance to the way in which the world (outer) actually encroaches upon 'subjectivity' (inner), as well as vice versa (PP 407). This possibility cannot be pursued in depth as yet, but this chapter intends to have redeemed Derrida from the caricature that suggests, without sufficient thought, that deconstruction rejects outright the possibility of an embodied 'meaning'. Such an understanding seems possible within deconstruction, although it remains to be understood why Derrida never really pursued this question.

As a chapter intent on opening up a plethora of questions, rather than closing them off, much remains to be considered. In this respect, it is worth turning to the writings of Vicki Kirby. Not only does she envisage Derrida's work as functioning without a linguistic reduction, but she also sees an applicability, based in Derrida's own comments, to a notion of embodiment, and one that appears remarkably similar to the position that I will ascribe to the later philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. The following

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Semiological Reductionism, p 43.

chapter will examine the cogence of this claim, because if Kirby's position is correct (or even close to correct) the commonly assumed antinomy between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida is also concordantly deconstructed.

4. Kirby, 'Corporeography', and the Question of an Embodied Deconstruction

In *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, Vicki Kirby argues that it is not in the interests of feminism to propound what she describes as an 'inessentialist' position in regard to embodiment. While she objects to undifferentiating biological givens that might, for example, construe women as confined to a nurturing role, she does not want to insist simplistically that embodiment has nothing to do with subjectivity. To pose the problem in terms more closely aligned with her own, Kirby is wary of the tendency simply to reverse binary oppositions, to swap nature for culture, reality for representation, and originary cause for interpretive effect. According to her, themes like 'textuality' and linguistic ideality have all but replaced the notion of 'reality'. As arguably the pre-eminent European philosopher of our generation, the work of Derrida is invariably associated with this reversal of binary oppositions that seems to prohibit recourse to questions concerning embodiment. However, Kirby's book, via an extended meditation upon Derrida's claim that "there is nothing outside of the text"[99], constitutes an important challenge to such an interpretation. Rather than eschewing any and every reference to the body, she insists that deconstruction cannot be contained within such a framework, and that it makes sense within the logic of *Of Grammatology* (and she also pays cursory attention to Derrida's essay, "'Eating Well' or the Calculation of the Subject") to conceive of embodiment in deconstructive terms. Examining the coherence of this claim will be the main focus of this chapter, although in order to facilitate this task, I will also compare the notion of embodiment that Kirby espouses to a curiously similar conception of embodiment that Merleau-Ponty theorises in his unfinished text, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

While Kirby's references to Derrida are often quite subtle, he is an important background figure in her work because many of the feminists that she criticises use Derridean deconstruction as an intellectual support. According to Kirby, recent feminist articulations of the body rely heavily upon the linguistic emphasis of early Derridean texts, and she finds theorists like Drucilla Cornell and Judith Butler to be complicit in something akin to the semiological reductionist interpretation. That is, they take Derrida as something of a linguistic idealist (TF 83–128), even if they generally endorse this

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[99]Kirby employs this particular translation of *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, and although we have previously seen reasons for preferring alternative translations, this chapter will abide by her protocol.

position rather than reject it as the more unsympathetic critics of deconstruction have done. Kirby contends that Derrida actually resists any such reading of his work, and has an implied conception of the body that avoids this mere reversal of binary oppositions.

Dissatisfied with what she takes to be the postmodern refusal to consider the question of the body, Kirby seeks to transplant, with slight variations, certain post-structuralist insights regarding language onto the contours of the body. She hence asks, "Is it absurd to assume, that if there is no outside of textuality, then the differential of language is articulate in/as blood, cells, breathing and so on?" and suggests that "the complexity of the sign is inseparable from the riddle of the copula" (TF 4). From the beginning then, it is obvious that her philosophical project is vastly different to that which has been exemplified by theorists like Martin Dillon[100]. Rather than interpreting Derrida's use of terms like 'textuality' and 'writing' narrowly, and hence envisaging his significance as being confined solely to the realm of the linguistic, Kirby endows these terms with their widest possible significance. According to Kirby and Derrida alike, terms like writing and textuality bear an applicability beyond the literal conception of the written word or text, and hence have a relevance that extends beyond their traditional domains. However, Kirby quickly adds an important proviso to this proposed generalisation of writing and textuality. She suggests that:

> I am not content to pose such an inquiry in a way that leaves the categories of nature and culture intact, as if the charge in my question only acknowledges the permeability of the body of nature to the inscriptive penetrations of the writing machine we call culture. I want to suggest instead that something a little more perverse and interesting might be going on (TF 4).

Admittedly, Kirby's book leaves the nature of this perversity somewhat unexplored, and this issue will be returned to towards the end of this chapter. For the moment, however, it suffices to point out that Kirby's explicit interactions with Derrida begin by way of disassociating him from Saussurean linguistics. According to her, Derrida's use of the Saussurean thesis regarding the "arbitrary nature of the sign" is intended simply to blur the difference between arbitrariness and systematicity, rather than suggesting *a priori* that all signs have no reference point whatsoever (TF 45). Her point is that rather than merely exalting the "free play of the sign" and hence coming close to reinstalling a version of linguistic idealism, Derrida is more intent to reveal that the arbitrariness that we associate

with the sign is also always involved in the most apparently systematic of activities. In this respect, it is worth acknowledging that rather than merely adopting or reinventing Saussure's thesis regarding the arbitrary nature of the sign, Derrida claims that he chooses to focus on what he takes to be this thesis' indispensable correlate, that being a more general argument regarding difference as the source of linguistic value (OG 52). Kirby's version of events goes one step further and makes an even more general point. She suggests that the paradox of the sign's identity (ie. that it is dependent upon difference) is symptomatic of the paradox of identity generally (TF 45). In other words, Derrida's point is not so much that everything is semiotic (and this is something that he explicitly denies), but that the processes of differing and deferring found within linguistic representation are symptomatic of a more general situation (hence the neologism *différance*) that afflicts everything that one might wish to keep sacrosanct, including the body and the perceptual.

Kirby reaffirms this distance between Derrida and Saussure by suggesting that "although it may be allowed that the precise break between nature and culture, or reality and representation, is now undecidable, we are left with a sense that [*for Saussure, and for much of postmodern thought since*] these realities are in fact discrete" (*my italics*, TF 52). For Kirby at least, Derrida's work avoids these discrete realities, that is, the maintaining of antinomies like nature and culture, and it also avoids dualistically separating language and all that we take to be its other (TF 53). However, Kirby is not content merely to refute the claim that Derrida is a semiological reductionist. She also offers some further ruminations on what her proposed intertwining of the ideal and the material might mean for notions like materiality and objects. According to her:

> If the critique of the sign is to be taken seriously, if materiality is a type of writing wherein difference is its defining force, then we would have to concede that objects are entirely permeable to what we describe as culture, and that the transformational plasticity that identifies the latter must also inhabit the former (TF 56).

This dialectical insistence that just as objects are influenced by what we describe as culture, so is culture influenced by materiality, appears to be closely related to Merleau-Ponty's lifetime efforts to avoid the dualisms of the Western tradition. Whether that be in his affirmation of an embodied intelligence, or in the transformational possibilities that

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[100]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism.*

perception has for him, Merleau-Ponty has consistently embarked upon the type of project that Kirby is now delineating in only slightly different terms. Rather than being able to separate perception from culture, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception "already stylises" (S 54), and in *The Visible and the Invisible* he also suggests that what we have termed the object always encroaches upon us, just as we encroach upon it (VI 123). These two claims ensure that rather than being conceived of as merely brute facts of the world, objects are capable of similar transformations to those that we commonly associate with culture. The curious proximity that Merleau-Ponty's sentiments bear to Kirby's above encapsulation of her project, indebted as it is to Derrida, is important. It again suggests that the traditional phenomenologist versus post-structuralist schematic might not be an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the more valuable contributions of both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

At a later stage in her text, Kirby is also moved to ask, "if the nature of matter is generative – if it conceives and construes itself through an involved representation, or differentiation of itself – then why must we presume that thought/language is alien to its identity or to this process?" (TF 115). This blurring of the boundaries between ideality and matter is again related to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, although Kirby's rather consistent invocation of the Aristotelian/Newtonian term 'matter' is not overly helpful in problematising dualistic thinking. Nevertheless, her descriptions of 'matter' being generative through differentiation with itself, would seem to be precisely how our embodiment works according to Merleau-Ponty. Particularly in *The Visible and the Invisible*, it becomes apparent that as Thomas Busch has suggested, "in the body's touching of itself is found a differentiation and an encroachment which is neither sheer identity nor non-identity"[101], and it is this very differentiation that is generative and makes subjectivity possible at all.

To substantiate this claim in adequate detail would take us too far afield of this chapter's main concerns, but it is important to recognise that according to an example that Merleau-Ponty uses regularly, it is through the differentiation (or divergence) between our left hand touching our right hand that we gain an apprehension of ourselves. Merleau-Ponty's initial (and, I think, permissible) presumption is that we can never simultaneously touch our right hand while it is also touching an object of the world. He

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[101]Busch, T., "Introduction:...Being...which is Staggered out in Depth" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 110.

suggests that "either my right hand really passes over into the rank of the touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted, or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it" (VI 148). There is then a gap (or *écart*) between ourselves as touching and ourselves as touched, a divergence between the sentient and sensible aspects of our existence, but this gap is importantly distinct from merely reinstating yet another dualism. The experiences of touching and being touched are not simply separate orders of being in the world, as Sartre, for example, has claimed in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre contends that:

> To touch and to be touched, to feel that one is touching and to feel that one is touched – these are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try and reconcile by the term 'double sensation'. In fact, they are radically distinct and exist on two incommunicable levels[102].

While Merleau-Ponty agrees with Sartre that these two experiences cannot be united by the term 'double sensation' (PP 93), he nevertheless insists upon the thoroughly communicative and interdependent relationship that obtains between the sentient and the sensible. According to him, the experience of our left hand touching our right hand does more than merely highlight the body's capacity to be both perceiving object and subject of perception in a constant oscillation (eg. the Sartrean 'looked at', 'looked upon' dichotomy). As Merleau-Ponty points out:

> I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching... In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries... to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection (PP 93).

This suggests that the hand that we touch while it is touching an inanimate object, is hence not merely another such 'object', but another fleshy substance that is capable of reversing the present situation and being mobile and even aggressive. Given that we cannot touch ourselves, or even somebody else without this recognition, the awareness of what it feels like to be touched encroaches upon the experience of touching. Any absolute distinction between being in the world as touching, and being in the world as touched

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[102]Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Barnes, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, p 304.

(such as Sartre's), deprives the existential phenomena of their true complexity. Our embodied subjectivity is never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the intertwining of these two aspects, and in an awareness that is predicated upon our body's reversible differentiation with itself. Kirby, we may remember, has also just suggested that a deconstructive notion of embodiment might involve 'matter' being generative through differentiation with itself, and this seems to precisely summarise the *écart*, or divergence, that Merleau-Ponty discerns. At the very least, Kirby's suggestion bears some important similarities, admittedly in an undeveloped way, with some major aspects of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy.

Significantly, however, this is also a position that Kirby is now characterising as indebted to Derrida. And while she admits that "evidence of this extraordinary 'weave' is not spectacularly present" and that "the business of proving its existence, when it is existence itself that must be rethought, underlines the question's labyrinthine dimensions" (TF 56), she nevertheless endorses this idea of matter being generative through differentiation with itself as being grounded in Derridean deconstruction. This is a difficult claim to substantiate, but even if we cannot definitively prove that what Kirby is trying to accomplish is deconstructive, it is apparent that deconstruction can be of some benefit in revealing how the logic that sustains and safeguards the mind-body dualism is always already breached.

Now, Kirby is certainly aware of the competing tendency towards interpreting Derridean deconstruction as a latter-day re-invention of idealism, and one that deliberately precludes any possibility of thinking about the body. She suggests that the claim that there is nothing outside of the text is "most commonly" interpreted in such a manner[103], and like Rodolphe Gasché before her, she concludes that the literary use of terms such as "writing, trace, and text" is largely responsible for this, as it often appropriates these terms for purposes not analogous to Derrida's own, and more often than not, divests them of their radical purchase (TF 60)[104]. It is also undeniable that Derrida has painstakingly insisted that his comment that "there is nothing outside of the text" has been interpreted incorrectly, and that he never intended it to indicate a complete

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[103]In an interesting passage in her interaction with Drucilla Cornell (TF 93), Kirby suggests that this type of interpretation of Derrida tends to induce the conclusion that deconstructive politics will involve either a utopian gesture or a prophetic cry. Kirby thinks that deconstruction is actually much more promising than this politically.

[104]Gasché, R., *The Tain of the Mirror*, p 252.

lack of constraining referents (LI 148). He reaffirms this in *Positions*, when he suggests that:

> This work cannot be purely theoretical or conceptual or discursive. I mean it cannot be the work of a discourse entirely regulated by essence, meaning, truth, consciousness, ideality, etc. What I call a 'text' is also that which 'practically' inscribes and overflows the limits of such a discourse (PO 59–60).

As should be apparent, Derrida does not consider his project to be a mere formalist quibble. While writing is privileged in many of his texts and used to overcome the tendency of Western metaphysics to exalt speech and phonetics, this is primarily for strategic reasons and to reveal its root in what he calls 'arche-writing' – that is, the way in which all that might be claimed to be typical of writing (for example, a discrepancy between the authorial intention and what is actually conveyed by a particular piece of writing) is inevitably also involved in all aspects of our existence.

However, it is not only the narrow interpretation of Derrida's main terms that Kirby objects to in the idealist reading. It is the consequent refusal to entertain any thoughts regarding the applicability of his work to embodied matters that most concerns her. She suggests the claim that there is nothing outside of the text:

> Is most commonly taken to mean that we are caught in an endless slide of referral that leads from one signifier to another signifier, one meaning to yet another meaning, in a vertiginous spiral of implication that never quite arrives at its destination. As a consequence, we can never retreat or advance to some natural, pre-discursive, or extra-textual space in order to test the truth or adequacy of our representations because, as we have seen, intelligibility is reckoned through such systems (TF 60–1).

Now, the preservation of that natural and pre-discursive space – traditionally the domain of phenomenology and the pre-reflective cogito – is very much what certain anti-Derrideans are concerned about. Theorists like Dillon, among others, want to retain a conception of the embodied self that feels and touches free from the aporias that Derrida associates with the repetition of writing and language[105]. In this respect, however, it is worth digressing to recognise that one of the major factors behind Merleau-Ponty setting out upon his final philosophy was the conviction that the tacit, or pre-reflective cogito of

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[105]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 77–8.

his earlier philosophy was problematic[106]. Presuming the possibility of a natural, primordial consciousness without language and anterior to thought, *The Visible and the Invisible* calls into question the coherence of this pre-reflective cogito, predicated as it is upon the idea of non-linguistic signification. As Merleau-Ponty suggests:

> What I call the tacit cogito is impossible. To have the idea of thinking (in the sense of thought of seeing and thought of feeling), to make the phenomenological reduction to the things themselves, to return to immanence and to consciousness, it is necessary to have words. It is by the combination of words that I form the transcendental attitude (VI 171).

This abandoning of the notion of the pre-reflective cogito also entails a giving-up on a certain conception of phenomenology. After all, Merleau-Ponty's problematising of the distinction between language and the perceptual ensures that the outside world can never be effectively bracketed away and excluded from consideration. Language is always implied, and Husserl's famous phenomenological reduction to the things themselves – or more accurately, to the things as they present themselves to consciousness prior to the 'natural attitude' – which wants to bracket away the outside world, can no longer be envisaged as a real possibility (PP xiv).

Merleau-Ponty even goes on to speak of the "mythology of self-consciousness to which the word consciousness refers", and contends that "there are only differences between significations" and language (VI 171). If there is no consciousness that is ever entirely present-to-itself, and there are only differences between significations, then it seems that the notion that there is "nothing outside of the text" is not as antithetical to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as many presume. This is particularly so if we, like Kirby, interpret Derrida's famous provocation as having an embodied relevance (ie. there is no outside of our embodied *context*) rather than enclosing all of us in some prison house of language.

While Kirby does not attempt a sustained critique of the desire to find an original presentation in the body that is not subject to the difference and instability that Derrida powerfully discerns in representation (and phenomenology's pre-reflective cogito is one such attempt), she does offer a powerful counter-example and one that is aligned with the position of Geoffrey Bennington. In *Jacques Derrida*, Bennington paradoxically suggests

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[106]Merleau-Ponty suggests that while the concept of the pre-reflective cogito can make understood how language is not impossible, it nevertheless cannot make understood how it is possible (VI 176).

that "we have to cast doubt on everything that can apparently limit deconstruction to language (and this is our only chance of understanding that there is nothing outside of the text)"[107]. Kirby agrees, and her own approach, which exceeds any conventional limits of language, involves acknowledging:

> An inseparability between representation and substance that rewrites causality... a writing that both circumscribes and exceeds the conventional divisions of nature and culture (mind and body). If we translate this into what is normally regarded as the matter of the body, then, following Derrida, "the most elementary processes within the living cell" are also a "writing" and one whose "system" is never closed. This would mean that the body is unstable – a shifting scene of inscription that both writes and is written (TF 61).

Such a project compromises the common understanding of materiality as a "rock-solid" something (TF 61), but the important question for us is what might this body that both writes and is written be? Kirby never makes this entirely explicit, and this will concern us towards the end of this chapter, but her presupposed position seems to be closely related to the Merleau-Pontyian conception of the body that is not so essentialist that it constitutes the world, and yet nor does it allow of an absolute, Sartrean freedom in regard to the world. Between the pillars of freedom and determinism, Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment is very much one that writes and is written, one that moulds the world in which we seek to live but is also constrained and defined by those others – 'objects' as much as people – who invariably also write us.

In regard to whether such an understanding of the body is indebted to deconstruction, one important passage from *Of Grammatology* helps Kirby out, and is worth repeating in its entirety. Derrida suggests that:

> Writing, sensible matter and artificial exteriority: a "clothing"… One already suspects that if writing is "image" and exterior 'figuration', this "representation" is not innocent. *The outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority*. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa (*my italics*, OG 35).

In this passage, Derrida clearly recognises that the debate between writing and speech is one that poses significant ramifications for that between body and mind, despite the fact

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[107]Bennington, G. *Jacques Derrida*, p 84.

that he does not elaborate upon this at any length. He even draws an analogy between writing and sensible matter, and implies that just as writing is not the 'clothing' of speech, sensible matter and the body are not the clothing that prevent us from seeing an inaccessible mind. In both cases, Derrida argues that inner and outer are irrevocably intertwined, and like Merleau-Ponty, he is hence dissatisfied with the conception of a monological consciousness that resides beneath our embodied exteriority and that might somehow be disclosed, but for an unfortunate lack.

It is also important to ascertain that in his above remark, Derrida strongly emphasises the mutual implication of speech and writing, the inner and the outer, that Saussure wanted to keep separate. The idea of speech conceived of as a discrete field – not even considering that it is also the privileged term of that opposition – partakes in the dichotomous vision of human existence that Derrida aims to deconstruct. Such passages go some way towards justifying Kirby's assessment that were Derrida to state his position in terms of ontological import, it would involve acknowledging that the written is not beyond speech, so to speak, even if "arche-writing" is, but that the example of writing serves to elucidate a type of breaching that is in existence in speech and all other 'phenomena'. In other words, Kirby implies that Derrida's primary goal is to reveal the mutual inextricability of the inner and the outer, or as she puts it, to establish that "the matter of difference is also the difference of matter" (TF 54). In this respect, it is worth recalling that one of Derrida's chapters in *Of Grammatology* is titled "The Written Being/The Being Written", and for this more generalised writing, evoked as it is by Derrida's references to "the scene of writing", Kirby invents the term "corporeography". Corporeography is intended to describe the mutual implication of the writing of the body, and the body of the written (TF 83)[108].

Later in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida reaffirms this kind of interpretation when he suggests that:

> Writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by the Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breathe, to speech, and to logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems – conversely – to borrow its metaphors (OG 35).

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[108]Some brief illustrations of what Kirby believes are feminist misinterpretations of Derrida would prove efficacious in exploring further what her 'corporeographic' reading of Derrida entails (and the significance

Derrida again points towards a correlation between these two problems (that is, the denigration of the written in relation to the spoken, the disparaging of the body in relation to thought/soul), and he also implies a specific affinity between writing and the body. If the problematic of the body is tacitly related to that of writing, then the efficacy of Derridean deconstruction should clearly depend on a complex understanding of 'writing' and the body, and a greater appreciation of what the materiality of the written consists in. Whether Derrida's work provides the resources to attain an understanding of the materiality of the written is another question, but such an appreciation would depend upon emphasising that both the notion of writing, and our thinking regarding embodiment, need to pay attention to their dependence upon difference, or in the terms of Merleau-Ponty, the divergence (*écart*) and dehiscence that typify our situation in the world. It is the difference between what we mean to write and the way the other interprets it, or between touching and being touched, that allows any form of writing and equally embodiment (of which we could not conceive were we completely self-present) to be possible at all.

These are valuable suggestions, but it is worth emphasising that Derrida does not actually offer much by way of a complex and detailed understanding of embodiment, notwithstanding some enigmatic references he has made to the tympanum, which is the membrane of the ear that is simultaneously both inside and outside (cf. M xxiii). In his recently published book, *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Art, Affirmation and Mourning in the Thought of Jacques Derrida*, David Farrell Krell makes a similar point, although he does not pursue it at length. Krell rhetorically asks: "if the scene of writing proves to be in and of the world, as Derrida insists it is, must not deconstruction run headlong into a phenomenology that is at the world and a thinking that is interlaced with the world?"[109]. It is difficult to be sure if Krell has any particular phenomenologist in mind here, although he does devote some exegetical space to the work of Merleau-Ponty soon after this quotation. Regardless, Krell's observation points out that certain embodied and phenomenological aspects of existence – ie. the way in which touching, sight, etc., actually open us beyond merely our own bodies and our own consciousness[110] – are

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of her feminist revisions), but space constraints preclude this taking place.

[109]Krell, D., *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Art, Affirmation and Mourning in the Thought of Jacques Derrida*, p 87.

[110]Of course, precisely what can be identified as embodied also becomes less clear once the dualism between mind and body is deconstructed. This reveals the difficulty of simply leaving formulations like mind and body behind, and in his "Working Notes" for *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty has

largely ignored by Derridean deconstruction (although see chapter five), despite the obvious relevance they bear to deconstruction. This ensures that there must be something of a confrontation between an embodied phenomenology and deconstruction. It might even be suggested that as yet neither phenomenology nor deconstruction has managed to avoid this situation and to speak to each other in less antagonistic terms. Kirby's book constitutes an important attempt to avoid this impasse, and to buttress an account of embodiment with a deconstructive insistence upon the writing that is in and of the world, although this chapter will eventually express some reservations about her ultimate success.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, it is worth considering a passage of Kirby's in which she tries to reconcile Derrida's emphasis upon temporal deferring with a notion of the body, that 'thing' which at least *appears* to be most 'present' to us of all. Her discussion also bears an applicability to Derrida's later emphasis upon the "to come" that has never yet been present[111], but let us remain within the logic of Kirby's text, and hence *Of Grammatology*, for the time being. In describing what an embodied, Derridean temporality might be, she suggests that:

> If we think temporality as textuality in the Derridean sense, we are reminded that the grammatological textile does not wait in anticipation of time's coming (a coming into presence) through the promise of the punctum, a lineal unfolding through an evolutionary march of different, separate, self-present moments. Time is not so much a thing – divisible into moments... rather, we must think of a moment as the body of time, the marking of an anterior future, which we will have been in the already not yet of the present. Opening itself to the differential pulse of otherness within itself, the fold of temporality differentiates itself by touching itself (TF 94).

Kirby's fundamental point in this paragraph is that rather than attesting to some type of primordial and undivided presence, our embodiment actually inaugurates the famous priority of the future anterior and Derrida's "always-already" motif (M 24)[112], or as she puts it, "the already not yet of the present". But what exactly does she mean by this

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hence argued that it is more important to recognise that "there is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body, and a chiasm between them" (VI 259).

[111]Derrida's notion of the "to come", and his related insistence upon the messianic aspects of alterity, will be analysed in chapter nine.

[112]The notion of the "always-already" also dominates Heidegger's *Being and Time* (cf. Section 128).

strange use of apparently incompatible tenses, the "already, not yet of the present"? Kirby seems to be suggesting that the temporality of an embodied moment involves nothing that could be construed as self-presence, but it is also important to note that she does not restrict herself to merely valorising the 'not yet' of the present, the Godot-like wait that ultimately becomes, in Derridean deconstruction, an insistence upon the priority of the "to come". Time, for Kirby, is also already there, even if in an internally divided way, and our embodied experience is hence not only about waiting and deferral.

Kirby's position is undoubtedly suggestive in linking itself to Derridean deconstruction. However, despite the insistence with which she attributes this type of embodied temporality to Derrida, her interpretation is one that makes quite a lot from relatively scarce resources. This is not necessarily to suggest that her reading is a falsification. It is arguably faithful to the spirit of deconstruction, in that it traces that which the author is largely unaware of, and in engendering a more embodied focus her interpretation moves in a direction with which this thesis must be sympathetic.

In the spirit of such a deconstructive retrieve, Kirby also makes use of a cryptic comment of Derrida's in *Of Grammatology*, where he suggests that it is "the game of the world that must be first thought; before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world" (OG 50). She cites this comment primarily as evidence that the play of semiosis is not all that he is concerned with, but it is worth elaborating upon this quote to make more interesting use of it. To place this comment about the game of the world in context, Derrida is attempting to argue that to think play radically (and this is his overarching intent), and hence without being empirical or metaphysical, "the ontological and transcendental problematics must first be seriously exhausted" (OG 50). For Derrida then, transcendental philosophy as exemplified by thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger is part of the game of the world that must be thought through before we can even begin to contemplate the play (cf. WD 292). Such a precondition should also include the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, as the question of the body would seem equally necessary for us to understand the game of the world, before we can begin to contemplate the play of the world in the precise way that Derrida demands of us.

Kirby also points out that, for Derrida, it is within "regional limits" that this play takes place. What these regional limits might be is left ambiguous by him, and notably so, but Kirby proposes that embodiment must be, at the very least, one important factor. According to her, the body can and should be conceived of as "the spacing of this game,

the ma(r)king of an uncanny interlude" (TF 63). For Kirby then, the body is envisaged as being both the spacing of the game, and also as marking an interlude, with all of the references to temporality that this term implies. Spatiality and temporality are necessarily intertwined by such a statement, just as Derrida has declared that the spatial differing and temporal deferring of *différance* escape the dualistic structure of an opposition. There is hence a sense in which our embodied situation can be viewed as further exemplifying Derridean notions like *différance* and the trace, and in a way that Derrida himself never attempted. By emphasising the possible applicability of Derridean thought to the body – as tentatively indicated by Derrida himself – Kirby tacitly reconciles Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological focus on embodiment with Derrida's own reluctance to confront the problematic.

While it should not be suggested that there is a latent return to phenomenology within Derrida's work, it is interesting to speculate upon exactly what regional limits might be involved in the play of the world. Or, more accurately, it is difficult to see how embodiment, albeit in an immensely complicated fashion, would not affect the structure of this world. This is not to affirm that our body has any determinate empirical limits, but – and axiomatically – that the very possibility of communication is predicated upon our being embodied, and more importantly, being embodied in a manner that is itself predicated upon a divergence, upon an alterity 'within' that makes possible the experience of an alterity 'without' (and vice versa).

Such themes will be expanded upon in later chapters, but it seems that we have returned to the problem with which this chapter began. Word and flesh, sign and matter, language and perception, are all utterly implicated for Kirby, as they are for both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, albeit in somewhat different ways. But despite her attempt to deconstruct traditional antinomies such as mind-body, nature-culture, Kirby does not want to commit to a monism and suggest that they are exactly the same thing. The body is not mere signification, or certainly not signification traditionally conceived. Her recognition of the possible applicability of Derridean ideas to the problematic of the body still leaves some questions unanswered, and certainly questions that Derrida himself hesitates to explore. As she suggests:

> This (generalisable mutability) does not mean, however, that we can simply add what we conventionally regard as the stuff of matter and substance to the soup of textual dissolution. The difficulty here is that we are bound to work at the

> interfacings of these binary borders in order to question the very notions of identity and separability that they maintain. Nevertheless, the displacement of matter from its oppositional stance over and against form, opens the question of matter, as indeed it must also open the question of ideality (TF 96).

Ultimately, this paragraph implies that as something of a pioneering work, the inter-relations of form and matter can be taken up again by others, and without doubt *Telling Flesh* does open up some valuable questions regarding form and matter that might otherwise be ignored. That said, it is significant that both Kirby's and Derrida's work reveal a similar aphoristic tendency that ensures that some important questions regarding embodiment are never quite followed through. Indeed, Kirby evocatively argues for the simultaneous breaching and interdependence of categories like inner and outer, particularly in relation to the language-embodiment problematic, but it is nevertheless difficult to attain an understanding about precisely how this transpires. While it might be agreed that some mutual implication is necessary between language and embodiment, how we are to concretely conceive of their inter-relation is far from obvious in Kirby's work.

For example, at one stage Kirby asks: "and how is the body itself a scene of writing, subject to a sentence that is never quite legible, because to read it is to write it, again, yet differently?" (TF 56). Unfortunately, the answer to this question is deferred. Exactly what type of relationship obtains between language and embodiment, if a difference is maintained between the two as Kirby suggests immediately above, and yet is nevertheless united by a governing dictum such as "there is nothing outside of the text", is a question that is unanswered. This is admittedly a difficult question, but one way of approaching the problem might be to posit language as supplementary to embodiment, in the Derridean sense of the supplement. In other words, it might be argued that it cannot be discerned whether the linguistic supplement makes up for an embodied lack, or simply adds on to and enriches our embodied presence. According to Derrida's theorising of the supplement, if language is posited as supplementary it is not actually secondary, but is paradoxically a constitutive aspect of the system that serves to reveal the myth of an embodied self-presence (cf. OG 144). In forthcoming chapters it will also become apparent that, for Merleau-Ponty, the figure of the chiasm functions as an ontological motif to describe how language and embodiment might be related to each other, but without simply being reducible to one another (cf. VI 87–93). Unfortunately, however,

Kirby does not pursue these type of possibilities in any depth.

Moreover, in her analysis of the behaviour of hysterics at a nineteenth-century Parisian hospital (TF 56–9), Kirby rather convincingly argues that mind and body, subject and object, far from being autonomous, separable entities, actually intertwine with each other in a complexity that is only just beginning to be appreciated. Interestingly, this is not unlike what Merleau-Ponty achieved in his own analysis of the sexual dysfunctions of Schneider in *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP 155), even if the saliency of his project is partly obscured by his presumptions about the universal applicability of a sexuality that looks suspiciously like male heterosexuality. However, returning to Kirby, whatever relationship does obtain between mind and body is also somewhat unclear in her work, and while we should not discount Merleau-Ponty's claim that "one cannot make a direct ontology" (VI 179), this is something of a problem. It can be speculated that this intertwining of the ideal and the material, language and embodiment, the mind and the body, could never completely efface the difference between thought and its object, for that would be to advocate either a relativism capable of no discrimination, or some ecstatic union with Being, both of which deconstruction could clearly never contemplate. An enmeshment of the ideal and the material might, however, conceivably problematise without ever quite transcendentally annulling the difference between thought and its object. The difference between thought and its object might hence become undecidable.

Kirby, however, is elusive about the nature of this enmeshment, and it seems that we need to subtlely alter her claim regarding the viability of an embodied deconstruction, at least to the extent to which she ties such a project to Derrida's work. This is not to suggest that Derridean deconstruction is irrelevant to questions concerning embodiment – on the contrary, it has been illustrated just how provocative and helpful it can be. However, both Derrida and Kirby exhibit a similar aphoristic tendency regarding how we are actually to conceive of a relationship between mind and body that breaches the dualism without simply becoming a monism, and this is the case despite Kirby's considerable efforts. To put the problem rather non-academically, Kirby pushes Derrida about as far as he can be pushed in the direction of an embodied deconstruction, and despite offering some important insights along the way, the result is an emaciated reinvention of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that induces more questions than answers. That is, Kirby's attempted deconstructive notion of embodiment leaves us with a

phenomenology without the depth that one would associate with a phenomenology, and it seems to me that there are other resources and other theoretical frameworks that might have helped Kirby in moving beyond the aphorisms of early deconstruction, and in hesitantly posing an answer to many of the important questions that she raises.

The work of Merleau-Ponty himself would be one obvious resource, given that a new and positive conception of what it is to be embodied is something that his philosophy clearly does want to achieve (VI 130–55)[113]. This will be illustrated throughout the remainder of this thesis, and it has already been shown that *The Visible and the Invisible* is capable of shedding some substantial light on Kirby's interesting but unfulfilled suggestion that matter is generative through differentiation with itself. Although Kirby has taught Merleau-Ponty for years, and although his project is relevant to her intents in *Telling Flesh*, he does not even merit a passing mention. This is not only perplexing, but an oversight that ignores a valuable conceptual tool, for as will become apparent, Merleau-Ponty can elucidate the embodied interdependence and breaching of form and matter more clearly than early deconstruction[114]. While Kirby realised that the negotiation of deconstruction with questions concerning embodiment is potentially a productive line of thought, her indebtedness to the particularities of Derridean deconstruction is not quite as emancipatory a resource as she believes.

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[113]Rather than positing a traditional dualism in which mind and body, subject and object, sentient and sensible, are discrete entities, Merleau-Ponty maintains that they are associated chiasmically. This is to suggest that perception is born where the subject seeing and the object that is visible cross, and the chiasm is an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment takes place. The body is neither sentient nor sensible, but exists in their intersection, where the two lines of the chiasm cross.

[114]Such a synthesis of structuralism (as preoccupied with form) and phenomenology (as preoccupied with the content, or the 'matter' of consciousness) remains to be attempted. It seems to me, however, that both Derrida's and Merleau-Ponty's work troubles this form/content distinction, albeit in very different ways.

5. The Later Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and the Metaphysics of Presence

Having problematised, but not entirely invalidated the contention that deconstruction can be of little help in adumbrating embodied concerns, this chapter will more explicitly consider the nature of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. This thesis has already illustrated the curious convergence between the notion of embodiment that Kirby rather generously attributes to Derrida and the more developed notion of embodiment that we have ascribed to Merleau-Ponty, but in several other important respects it will be shown that the philosophical positions of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida are more closely aligned than many critics, including Derrida himself, presume. Indeed, it will be argued that this is particularly so in regard to three main themes: dialectics; temporality; and visibility/invisibility. By examining Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's surprising and counter-intuitive proximity on such themes, this chapter will also begin to sketch out the manner in which Merleau-Ponty's work can avoid being denigrated as yet another version of the all-encompassing metaphysics of presence[115].

However, before becoming immersed in a comparison of their respective contributions to dialectics, temporality, and visibility, it is necessary to consider Derrida's relationship to phenomenology generally, since this is partly what is being called into question by a comparison with Merleau-Ponty's thought. Derrida has had a long and infinitely complicated association with phenomenology for his entire career, including ambiguous relationships with Husserl and Heidegger, and something closer to a sustained allegiance with Lévinas (although chapter nine will analyse the many criticisms that Derrida has also made in regard to Lévinas). Despite this complexity, two main aspects of Derrida's thinking regarding phenomenology remain clear. Firstly, he thinks that the exaltation of the immediacy of experience is the new transcendental illusion, and secondly, he argues that despite its best intents, phenomenology cannot be anything other than a metaphysics (SP 75, 104)[116]. Moreover, Derrida also defines metaphysics as the science of presence, as for him, all metaphysics privileges presence, or that which *is*. While they are presented somewhat schematically here, these inter-related claims

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[115]Such thematics will also be indirectly pursued in the second half of this thesis, where it will be argued that Merleau-Ponty's treatment of alterity does not propound an "imperialism of the same".

[116]However, as should be apparent, this chapter will agree with Damien Byers who gave a paper entitled "Must Phenomenology be a Metaphysics?", that contested the Derridean-inspired suggestion that phenomenology must be a metaphysics (Australian National University, Philosophy Staff Seminar Series, October 1999).

constitute Derrida's major arguments against phenomenology.

According to him, phenomenology is a metaphysics of presence because it unwittingly relies upon the notion of an indivisible self-presence, or in the case of Husserl, the possibility of an exact internal adequation with oneself (SP 66–8). In various texts, Derrida contests this valorisation of an undivided subjectivity, as well as the resultant primacy that such a position accords to the 'now'. For instance, in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida argues that if a 'now' moment is conceived of as exhausting itself in that experience, it could not actually be experienced, for there would be nothing to juxtapose itself against in order to illuminate that very 'now'. Instead, Derrida wants to reveal that every so-called 'present', or 'now' point, is always already compromised by a trace, or a residue of a previous experience, that precludes us ever being in a self-contained 'now' moment (SP 68). Phenomenology is hence envisaged as nostalgically seeking the impossible: that is, coinciding with oneself in an immediate and pre-reflective spontaneity. Admittedly, this nostalgia can be discerned in some passages of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, but it is not so clear that this also applies to *The Visible and the Invisible*. Before contemplating this latter text in greater detail, however, it is worth returning to Derrida's more general characterisation of metaphysical thought in order to interrogate what his dismissal of the metaphysics of presence might entail, and whether it does, in fact, apply to the later phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. In the 'Afterword' to *Limited Inc.*, Derrida suggests that metaphysics can be defined as:

> The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent (LI 236, cf. M 195).

In this passage, it becomes apparent that metaphysics is not only the science of presence, and of valorising that which appears. According to Derrida, metaphysics also involves installing hierarchies and orders of subordination in the various dualisms that it encounters and/or engenders (M 195). Metaphysical thought is envisaged as prioritising

presence and purity at the expense of the contingent and the complicated, which are considered to be merely aberrations that are not important for philosophical analysis. This chapter will contest the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy conforms to both aspects of this metaphysical paradigm (ie. an insistence upon an immediate presence-to-self, and an insistence upon hierarchical dualisms) and by implication will also contest the claim that such a position is inevitable for phenomenology more generally.

In his later philosophy, Merleau-Ponty does not appear to convey any sort of hierarchy that privileges presence and purity. On the contrary, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he specifically claims that:

> *What we propose here, and oppose to the search for the essence, is not the return to the immediate*, the coincidence, the effective fusion with the existent, the search for an original integrity, for a secret lost and to be rediscovered, which would nullify our questions and even reprehend language. If coincidence is lost, this is no accident; if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being and no disclosure will make us comprehend it (*my italics*, VI 121–2).

While it is sometimes claimed that Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is only precariously poised within phenomenology, in that it disputes both the pre-reflective cogito and the phenomenological reduction itself (at least as Husserl conceives of it), the above quotation clearly suggests that his work is a long way from betraying a nostalgia for some pure immediacy that might yet be rediscovered. On the contrary, according to Merleau-Ponty, we can never recuperate the pre-reflective faith (VI 35, 99). Moreover, it is worth noting that Derrida describes a metaphysics of presence as involving an attempt to first think the purity of an origin, before then proceeding to consider the deviations and the "accidents" which fall outside the terrain of this origin, but always, or so logocentric thinkers tell us, inconsequentially[117]. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the impossibility of any absolute presence-to-self is not a derivative accident, or a fall from grace, but is symptomatic of a constitutive divergence (*écart*) that can never be assuaged.

This thesis has previously contemplated the fundamental role that the notion of *écart* has played in Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy. It names a divergence that is nevertheless not adequately characterised as a dualism, because the differences between an apparent dualism (eg. mind-body and even self-other) are revealed as chiasmically

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[117]Probably the most obvious illustration of this metaphysical tendency is in Derrida's various discussions of the texts of John Searle. At least according to Derrida, Searle repeatedly acknowledges exceptions to his

intertwined. For the moment, it suffices to recapitulate that any absolute self-presence is prohibited by this perennial difference between the sentient and the sensible. Moreover, an understanding of both mind and body – to persist with a dualism that does not accurately represent the phenomena, as "there is a body of a mind and a mind of a body, and a chiasm between them" (VI 259) – depends upon this very dehiscence, and is inconceivable without it. In other words, subjectivity is predicated upon a gap, or a difference that is not a dualism, and in such sentiments Merleau-Ponty does not appear to conform to the standard deconstructive definition of the metaphysics of presence.

This becomes even more apparent if we remember that the embodiment of which he speaks is always typified by ambiguity. Derek Taylor is one commentator who has emphasised this quality of his work, and he suggests that "Merleau-Ponty's greatness lies in his ability to demonstrate how that thing which has always frustrated thinkers from the beginning, namely contingency (or 'ambiguity'), is not accidental to thought but rather is constitutive of it"[118]. Rather than being subordinated, contingency and ambiguity are accorded their due import in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Of course, it is not immediately apparent that a philosophy of ambiguity must, of necessity, avoid being consigned to the metaphysics of presence. Nor, for that matter, does Merleau-Ponty's insistence that Being is not disclosable ensure that he is not a metaphysician of presence. Negative theology has traditionally held similar positions, although it tends to presume that somebody suitably qualified, and who manages to evade naming and circumscribing the experience of God, can still somehow access the secret. But, for Merleau-Ponty, like Derrida, the secret is that there is no secret (ON 29–30, 67–8). Now, for this statement to be envisaged to characterise Derrida's work accurately, this chapter would require numerous addendums and supplements – supplements that would reveal his position on the lack of a secret (other than there being no secret) to be importantly different from the way in which such an aphorism could be said to accurately represent the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. That acknowledged, Merleau-Ponty's notion of ambiguity entails at least a related position, and more importantly for this chapter's purposes, a philosophy that does not prioritise presence and purity[119].

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speech act theory, but nevertheless insists that they are unimportant and derivative occurrences (LI 118).

[118]Taylor, D., "Phantasmic Genealogy" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 156.

[119]It is, however, worth recognising that in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida rejects the notion of ambiguity (OG 71), and his reasons for doing so will be examined in chapter six.

Even in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where ambiguity comes to occupy such an important role in his philosophy, it is not envisaged to be a shortcoming, or a fall from some better, aggrandised state. We were never the fortunate occupiers of some absolute presence-to-self. On the contrary, ambiguity is defined as the inevitable condition of our finite temporality, and at least for the atheist that was Merleau-Ponty[120], there is no God that makes this possible and who might avoid the many and varied conundrums that befall a temporal existence (*samsara*, or the cycle of suffering and rebirth for the Buddhists). Of course, Heidegger has made it clear that a philosopher can be onto-theological (which is basically metaphysical) without admitting to a belief in God, at least in the way that one generally conceives of a deity. However, to the minimal extent that Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy occasionally exhibits a nostalgia for a pure, pre-reflective cogito that might be spontaneously at one with its surroundings – a remnant of the metaphysical desire for absolute 'presence' – this last vestige of presence seems to have been exorcised from his later philosophy (cf. VI 175–6).

Is it possible that despite analysing embodiment, Merleau-Ponty did so without succumbing to 'presence' as his example *par excellence*? Vicki Kirby certainly thinks that such a project is viable, and if it is not already apparent, this thesis will contend that Merleau-Ponty did manage such a feat, although the longer answer to that question depends upon this chapter's forthcoming consideration of the invisible that he considers to be constitutively involved in embodiment. For the moment, however, it is worth considering a quote of Merleau-Ponty's from *The Visible and the Invisible*, which suggests that while his later philosophy maintains an embodied focus, it also seems to have done so without partaking in something that might be retrospectively characterised as a metaphysics of presence. Of the possibility of an embodied certitude, he suggests that as:

> Entirely irresistible as it may be [*this prospect*], it remains absolutely obscure; we can live it, we can neither think it, nor formulate it, nor set it up in theses. Every attempt at elucidation brings us back to the dilemmas... And it is this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us (*my italics*, VI 11).

According to Merleau-Ponty then, despite the sensible world being unjustifiable, there is

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[120]While Merleau-Ponty became an atheist, he was a practising Christian in his youth and early adulthood. For further biographical information, see Moran, D., *An Introduction to Phenomenology*, London:

nevertheless a lived certitude to it, and it is from this certitude that truth emerges. Derrida would probably not endorse such a passage, but it must be remarked that the truth of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is certainly not a truth in the sense that Husserl thought could be extracted from phenomenology. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, it is an obscure certitude that we live with, although we can neither think it, nor formulate it, and it emerges from unjustifiability.

At a later stage in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty even suggests that in the philosopher's descriptions of this sensible world, "there is no longer identity between the lived experience and the principle of non-contradiction" (VI 87). This apparent disavowal of the law of non-contradiction obviously requires some substantial consideration. Indeed, it appears to challenge one of the most fundamental principles of Western philosophy since Aristotle, even if some recent philosophers like Graham Priest would endorse this move (although perhaps not the rationale behind it)[121]. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is more important to note Merleau-Ponty's didactic intent. In explaining this disavowal, he suggests that:

> The situation of the philosopher who speaks as distinct from what he speaks of, insofar as that situation affects what he says with a certain latent content which is not its manifest content... implies a divergence between the essences he fixes and the lived experience to which they are applied, between the operation of living the world and the entities and negentities in which he expresses it (VI 87).

For Merleau-Ponty then, lived experience may partake in contradiction on account of a residue of this difference between the act of speaking and what is spoken of (something like a performative contradiction), and a correlative divergence between a latent and a manifest content. This divergence hints at a predicament that is closely related to what Derrida has later insisted upon in his strategy of deconstruction, in that both philosophers point towards the inevitability of a philosophical expression containing a contradictory element within it. Indeed, Derrida has also implicitly entertained the possibility that the law of non-contradiction might be false, in suggesting that there may instead be a law of impurity, or "a principle of contamination" (cf. LI 204). It is important to appreciate that there are some surprising similarities between Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's descriptions of the necessarily double nature of a philosophy that can never recapture the

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Routledge, 2000, p 392.

[121]Priest, G., *In Contradiction*, Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987.

pre-reflective faith, or coincide with itself in a moment of self-presence. This proximity between deconstruction and Merleau-Ponty's own methodology, which he labels as a "hyper-reflection" (VI 38), will continue to be examined throughout this chapter, but for the moment it suffices to point out that these similarities reaffirm that there are some considerable difficulties involved in characterising Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a metaphysics of presence.

However, secondary proponents of deconstruction routinely assume that Derrida's critique of the notion of presence is relevant to Merleau-Ponty, even though Derrida has never addressed any text towards establishing this (this is an interesting omission considering the vast array of thinkers that he has deconstructed). Derrida has made only a few isolated comments about Merleau-Ponty throughout his entire body of work[122], at least until his relatively recent text, *Memoirs of the Blind*, which while paying Merleau-Ponty some considerable attention is actually predominantly flattering, and as the second section of this chapter will illustrate, is even partly indebted to his predecessor on the French scene[123]. While the criticisms that Derrida directs at the metaphysics of presence seem to apply to occasional passages in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is certainly no clear matter. When one considers Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, it becomes even more apparent that Derrida's dismissal of the phenomenological tradition has had the effect of "dismissing Merleau-Ponty on the basis of arguments primarily directed against Husserl and secondarily against Heidegger and Sartre"[124]. What I am suggesting here is not particularly original. Martin Dillon, Gary Madison, and Hugh Silverman have all suggested similar things[125], although we have

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[122]In his doctoral thesis, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*, Derrida suggests that while his work is indebted to phenomenology, it is to be read specifically in opposition to Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. In his essay, "Violence and Metaphysics", he observes that the movement of temporality in Merleau-Ponty's work is his alterity (WD 104, footnote 36), and this comment seems complimentary. In "Force and Signification", Derrida implies that Merleau-Ponty's conception of meaning need not be considered to be phonocentric (cf. WD 11). However, his only sustained treatment of Merleau-Ponty has been *Memoirs of the Blind*, which will be examined in the following section of this chapter. Derrida has also recently completed another book that briefly considers Merleau-Ponty, entitled *Le Toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy*. Some parts of this book have been translated into English by Peggy Kamuf (see Derrida, J., "*Le Toucher*: Touch/to touch him", *Paragraph*, 16:2, 1993, p 122–57).

[123]For more information on the debt that Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* owes to Merleau-Ponty, see the following section of this chapter, and also Vallier, R., "Blindness and Invisibility: The Ruins of Self-Portraiture" in *Écart and Différance*, ed. Dillon, Humanities Press, 1997, p 191–207.

[124]Dillon, M., "Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 129.

[125]Dillon, M., & Madison, G., & Silverman, H., in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, p 129 & 143. Also see Haas, M., & Haas, L., "Merleau-Ponty and the Origin of Geometry" in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, eds. Evans & Lawlor, Albany: State University

previously discussed reasons for being wary of the sentiments propounded by the first two of these thinkers, at least when it comes to comparing the work of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

Moreover, in emphasising this 'blind spot' that is involved in Derrida's thought and also in the post-structuralist repudiation of phenomenology generally[126], this chapter should not efface the fact that Derrida and many other French writers of the 1960s and 70s were wrestling with the possibility of a difference not reducible to dialectic (OG 314), or to opposition. The phenomenological scene that preceded them, with its alleged failure to cope with and thematise genuine alterity, was certainly something that they were trying to avoid and, in an important sense, move beyond. However, traditional conceptions of opposition, as well as dialectics, are radically altered by Merleau-Ponty's work (in particular by *The Visible and the Invisible*) and it is more than curious that these philosophers did not accord him more attention[127].

This point is rendered even more salient by the similarities that aspects of Merleau-Ponty's proposed hyper-reflection (which he synonymously exchanges with the term "hyper-dialectic") bear to deconstructive themes. This has already been partially illustrated, but Rodolphe Gasché is one important thinker to have recognised the manner in which Merleau-Ponty's hyper-reflection pre-empted certain aspects of deconstruction[128], and yet these aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought are often ignored and

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of New York Press, 2000, p 177–88. Their essay argues that Derrida's critique of Husserl has very little bearing on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, and there are many other examples of commentators unwilling to extend the applicability of Derrida's denunciation of Husserl to the work of Merleau-Ponty.

[126]Michel Foucault is also rather dismissive of the phenomenological tradition in his book *The Order of Things*, and his criticisms of phenomenology are actually more schematic than Derrida's own sometimes extensive treatment (see Foucault, M., *The Order of Things*, p xiv). In *The Politics of Subjectivity*, Nick Crossley criticises Foucault's rejection of phenomenology for ignoring the complexity of the tradition, and he also argues that Foucault fails to provide any substantial reasons for rejecting the specific phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (see Crossley, N., *The Politics of Subjectivity*, p 136–69).

[127]Merleau-Ponty never entirely gave up on the dialectic, but Diana Coole has convincingly argued that his conception of a hyper-dialectic actually avoids many of the problems that 'postmodern' thinkers have raised in regard to Hegelian dialectics, for example. See Coole, D., *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism*, London: Routledge, 2000, p 122–155.

[128]Gasché, R., *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*, p 29–30. According to Gasché, Merleau-Ponty only anticipates deconstruction (rather than is deconstructive) because "the deferral of coincidence in Merleau-Ponty's critique of reflection is judged to be merely temporal". This is an interesting observation, because it is often suggested that while Heidegger achieved this temporal victory, Merleau-Ponty is to be commended more for his contributions to spatiality, particularly in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In fact, Gasché's comment is surprising and I agree with Thomas Busch that Merleau-Ponty's *écart* involves both a spatial and a temporal non-coincidence. See Busch, T., "Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on the Phenomenon" in *Écart and Différance*, ed. Dillon, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, p 23–4.

he is somewhat spuriously characterised as a foundationalist thinker[129]. Of course, unlike Derrida, Merleau-Ponty's critique of reflection and his subsequent call for a hyper-reflection (or hyper-dialectic) does quite obviously locate itself primarily in an analysis of the body, where he discerns a necessary and constitutive divergence within the embodied situation. As we have seen, this *écart* is variously described as the difference between the sentient and the sensible, the touching and the touched, and for Merleau-Ponty, it also applies to several other divergences, including one between the perceptual faith and its articulation (VI 87).

However, this concept is most easily demonstrated through an example that we have previously contemplated – that is, an individual's left hand touching their right hand, while their right hand is also simultaneously touching another object. Of this situation, Merleau-Ponty suggests that this difference between touching and being touched reveals a fundamental divergence within the body, although it is not such that it prohibits an overall grasp of the body (VI 9, cf. PP 108). Just as this gap, or dehiscence, ensures the impossibility of any thorough and all-encompassing self-perception, it is also that which allows perception and indeed subjectivity to be possible at all. This is why Merleau-Ponty suggests that *écart* is "not a radical discontinuity, but a distance which is not the contrary of proximity" (VI 135) and that it "both disjoins and conjoins at the same time"[130]. Now, this should allude to some similarities with the "possible-impossible" aporias that typify Derrida's more recent work and which will be examined in forthcoming chapters[131], but it is more important to ascertain that if our embodied divergence inaugurates our capacity for perception (as well as language and reflection), this same divergence also ensures that there are certain limits upon this capacity. Just as we cannot reflexively attain to a coincidence or self-identity with the hand that we are touching, for Merleau-Ponty the philosophy of reflection cannot entirely overcome a similar divergence (VI 38).

In his critique of Hegel, Sartre, and others, Merleau-Ponty insists that "reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role" (VI 33). There is a temporal divergence that precludes the attempted

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[129]Lechte, J., *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, London: Routledge, 1994.
[130]Madison, G., "Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: *La DifférEnce*" in *Écart and Différance*, ed. Dillon, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997, p 102.
[131]Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty refers to reflection and also his notion of the flesh – which will be briefly explicated in chapter eight – as involving an "impossible-possible" (VI 34).

recovery of meaning via reflection from coinciding with that which it wants to demarcate. The task of hyper-reflection then, is to ensure that reflection is always aware of its own finitude. It is hence somewhat removed from philosophical reflection itself, and resides in what several theorists have referred to as the non-space of philosophy[132]. The proximity of such sentiments to deconstruction has been widely recognised, and also occasionally contested, but at the very least, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology criticises the naivety of traditional dialectics in much the same way as Derrida's work does, even if it might be suggested that Merleau-Ponty also recuperates the dialectic on other terms (ie. as a hyper-dialectic). It will soon be argued that their respective accounts of dialectics are actually a little closer to each other than such a formulation implies, but what is irrefutable is that like Derrida, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the tendency of the metaphysical tradition to exalt self-presence and the rationalism that this usually entails. The idea of philosophy being able to mirror or transcend nature is disparaged (VI 99), and yet for Merleau-Ponty, traditional reflective thought is inevitable and indeed indispensable, just as it also is for Derrida. In regard to their critique of the philosophy of reflection (and also in their recognition of our simultaneous dependence upon it) there is at least some affinity.

Of course, it cannot be disputed that there are some important differences between their respective methodologies, including the obvious fact that Merleau-Ponty propounds his own ontological arguments, whereas deconstruction primarily focuses upon other philosopher's or artisan's arguments. To the minimal extent that we can refer to Derrida's 'own' arguments, they are always inextricably intertwined with the arguments of whomever he seeks to deconstruct. For example, Derrida claims that his critique of the Husserlian 'now' moment is actually based upon resources that he discerns within Husserl's own text (ie. the retentional and protentional aspects of consciousness) which elide the self-presence that Husserl was attempting to secure (SP 64–66). If Derrida's point is simply that Husserl's phenomenology holds within itself conclusions that Husserl failed to recognise, Derrida can, ostensibly at least, disavow any transcendental or ontological position. One consequence of this difference is that Derrida's work often appears less convinced in its rhetoric than Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does.

For this reason, it is necessary to consider more precisely what it is that Merleau-Ponty wants his philosophy to achieve. This will help to clarify why his particular version of the dialectic can elude being denigrated as yet another version of the metaphysics of

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[132]Silverman, H., *Inscriptions*, p 102, & Gasché, R., *Inventions of Difference*, p 33.

presence, and it will also establish some of the ways in which this apparently stark methodological disparity between phenomenology and deconstruction begins to be broken down. According to Merleau-Ponty:

> What we call hyper-dialectic is a thought that, on the contrary, is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity. The bad dialectic is that which thinks it recomposes being by a thetic thought, by an assemblage of statements, by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; *the good dialectic is that which is conscious of the fact that every thesis is an idealisation*, that Being is not made up of idealisations or of things said... but of bound wholes where signification never is except in tendency (*my italics*, VI 94).

While this passage reaffirms the enduring role of ambiguity in his philosophy, the last sentence of this quotation is also closely related to themes that are more commonly associated with the work of Derrida. Merleau-Ponty's describes his hyper-dialectic as acknowledging that not only is every thesis an idealisation, but also that being cannot be ascertained through such idealisations. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty also goes on to suggest that such a dialectical thought:

> Abounds in the sensible world, but on condition that the sensible world has been divested of all that the ontologies have added to it. One of the tasks of the dialectic, as a situational thought, a thought in contact with being, is to shake off the false evidences, to denounce the significations cut off from the experience of being, emptied – and to criticise itself in the measure that it itself becomes one of them (VI 92).

Other than the recourse to terms like being, this passage reads very much like Derrida's deconstructive prescriptions, or at least an embodied version of them. Merleau-Ponty's hyper-dialectic is envisaged as being a situational thought that, like deconstruction, must criticise all thinking that ignores the conditional nature of idealisations, and it must also maintain a vigilance to ensure that it does not itself become one of them. This is why Merleau-Ponty describes his philosophical project as one of propounding an "indirect" rather than a direct ontology (VI 179). These themes are deserving of more prolonged attention, but there seems to be a significant and underestimated connection between what Merleau-Ponty's hyper-reflection seeks to achieve and what Derrida's

deconstructive methodology has more recently attempted[133].

Of course, a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida also requires further consideration of temporality, and the role that both of these theorists accord it in their respective philosophies. As has been mentioned, Derrida has consistently rejected phenomenology for its tacit dependence on a 'now' moment, or temporal immediacy, and following his refutation of Husserlian temporality, he remarks that "in the last analysis, what is at stake is... the privilege of the actual present, the now" (SP 62–3). This chapter has already highlighted the importance of temporal matters in inducing Merleau-Ponty's conception of a hyper-reflection, and in *Phenomenology of Perception* he argues that "if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, the world, the thing, and others, we shall understand that beyond these there is nothing to understand" (PP 365). Derrida and Merleau-Ponty hence have a shared recognition of just how important temporality is to all of the problems that confront both philosophy and everyday subjectivity, although their two statements are not equivalent. Again, Merleau-Ponty's position is the more emphatic and convinced, and this is symptomatic of an important difference in their respective projects.

More substantively, however, deconstruction also argues that all speculation about time is metaphysical[134], and it hence tries to restrict itself to deconstructing other narratives about time (such as Husserl's). One consequence of this is, to put it crudely, that Merleau-Ponty can be envisaged as having a philosophy of time (which will soon be briefly explicated), whereas Derrida might claim to simply deconstruct other philosophies of time. Of course, it can be argued that Derrida has an implied conception of time that he will not always admit to[135]. Without such a presupposition, it is difficult to understand the basis from which he could claim that the 'immediacy of experience' is a transcendental *illusion*. For the moment, however, we are better served by delineating the antinomy that is often presumed to exist between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on this issue.

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[133]In this respect, however, it needs to be emphasised that I am not attempting to establish any absolute unity between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. On the contrary, the argument is a relatively modest one that seeks to destabilise the antinomy that is often presumed to exist between them and which ensures that Merleau-Ponty's embodied philosophy is not considered as seriously as it should be.

[134]Derrida, J., "Ousia and Gramme: A Note to a Footnote in *Being and Time*" in *Phenomenology in Perspective*, ed. Smith, trans. Casey, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970, p 88–9.

[135]Shaun Gallagher and David Wood undertake a more sustained examination of the extent to which a metaphysical claim about time can be tacitly attributed to Derrida. See Gallagher, S., "On the Pre-Noetic Reality of Time" in *Écart and Différance*, ed. Dillon, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997, p 134,

As has been affirmed by numerous commentators, Derrida strategically utilises a conception of time that emphasises deferral and this is assumed to be vastly different to the 'immediacy' found within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. While this chapter has partly extricated Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy from associations with the much-derided phenomenological exaltation of immediacy, Derrida certainly does not appear to affirm any type of certitude to our embodied existence, even if it is a certitude that Merleau-Ponty suggests is "obscure" (VI 11). To summarise a few themes that have occupied a major place in Derrida's work, the temporal hesitation involved in his notion of *différance*, the 'undecidability' of decision-making (which will be explicated in chapter six), the priority allocated to the "to come", and his later philosophy's attempt to set a place at the table for something wholly other (*tout autre*), are all united by his abiding emphasis upon the thematic of deferral, as well as by the preparation for a future that is radically other to the now.

While such themes will be considered in detail in later chapters, it is worth observing that even if Derrida does not think that we can ever entirely overcome metaphysics (WD 280), for him, there is a persistent hope for what the future might contain and this is also what makes deconstruction a form of prophesy[136]. There is not much content to these prophecies of, and calls to the future, but to invoke a distinction that will be examined in chapter nine, this is the difference between a *messianic* structure of existence which is open to the coming of an entirely ungraspable and unknown other, and the concrete, historical *messianisms* (ie. the Islamic, Jewish and Christian religions) that are open to the coming of a specific other of known characteristics. A deconstruction that entertained any type of grand prophetic narrative, like a Marxist story about the gradual movement of history toward a pre-determined future which, once attained, would make notions like history and progress obsolete, would be yet another vestige of 'logocentrism' and susceptible to deconstruction. Precisely in order to avoid the problems that such messianisms engender – eg. killing in the name of progress, mutilating on account of knowing the will of God better than others, etc. – Derrida suggests that:

> I am careful to say 'let it come' because if the other is precisely what is not

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& Wood, D., *The Deconstruction of Time*, p 336.

[136]For Derrida's own reflections on the link between deconstruction and prophecy, see his interview with Richard Kearney in "Deconstruction and the Other: Dialogue with Derrida" in *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p 119.

> invented, the initiative or *deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening*, in uncloseting, in destabilising foreclusionary structures, so as to allow for the passage toward the other (RDR 60).

Much remains to be explicated about these aspects of his later philosophy, but deconstruction is clearly motivated by a desire to open up myriad possibilities for the future, and a future that is of a fundamentally different order to the 'now'. But deconstruction is not merely prophetic and hopeful about the future; on the contrary, it is both quasi-transcendental and philosophical when it emphasises the future. Despite Derrida's claims about deconstruction being merely strategic, and hence not involving transcendental assertions about the nature of the world, it inevitably breaches these conditions[137]. While philosophers like Richard Rorty and David Wood have paid this topic considerable attention, Derrida does assert the priority of a temporal deferral, and later the alterity of the future, in a philosophical way – or at least in a way that is not merely strategic, for it confuses and compromises the entire distinction between philosophical and strategic interests.

John Caputo expresses this point succinctly when he claims that Derrida's criticisms of Husserlian temporality in *Speech and Phenomena* involve an attempt to convey that:

> What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always "to come". Every time you try to stabilise the meaning of a thing, try to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away (cf. SP 104)[138].

To put Derrida's point simplistically, it might be suggested that the meaning of a particular object, or a particular word, is never stable, but always in the process of change (eg. the dissemination of meaning for which deconstruction has become notorious). Moreover, the significance of that past change can only be appreciated from the future and, of course, that 'future' is itself implicated in a similar process of transformation were it ever to be capable of becoming 'present'. The future that Derrida is referring to is hence not just a future that will become present, but the future that makes all 'presence' possible and also impossible.

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[137]It is worth repeating that Derrida insists that the dissemination of meaning is more "originary" than gathering (OG 232), and also that *différance* is "older" than Heidegger's ontic-ontological distinction (SP 154). This transcendental tendency has been analysed in more depth in chapter three.
[138]Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 31.

Derrida's work offers many important temporal contributions of this quasi-transcendental variety, but it is worth pointing out that even in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty has also insisted that:

> My hold on the past and the future is precarious and my possession of my own time is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn, further developments in order to be understood (PP 346).

This remark is fairly self-explanatory, and in his chapter on temporality from this same text, Merleau-Ponty goes on to argue that "it is the essence of time to be not only actual time, or time which flows, but also time which is aware of itself, for the explosion or dehiscence of the present towards the future is the archetype of the relation of self to self" (PP 426). In such sentiments, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that the relationship that we have to ourselves is one that is always typified by a divergence, or alterity, on account of a temporal explosion towards the future that precludes us ever being self-present. For Merleau-Ponty then, as for Derrida, there can be no self-enclosed 'now' moment, because time always has this reflexive aspect that is aware of itself, and that opens us to experiences beyond our particular horizons of significance.

As yet then, there seems to be no reason to presume that Merleau-Ponty and Derrida have wildly different understandings of temporality, although it may be coherently argued that the relative emphasis that they accord to this deferring aspect of our temporal existence is importantly distinct. Indeed, in relation to deconstruction's consistent attempts to open us up to an unknown future that cannot be grasped, it is worth recalling Derrida's reply to a question posed to him during the Villanova Roundtable Conference. As captured in Caputo's *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, Derrida insists that "as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience"[139]. The meaning of this Beckettian-inclined comment is not as axiomatic as it appears, but it reaffirms that for Derrida, there can be no presence-to-self, or self-contained identity, because the 'nature' of our temporal existence is for this type of experience to elude us. Our predominant mode of being is what he will eventually term the messianic, in that we wait for an absolutely undetermined Godot whose presence is forever forestalled and deferred. The opening of

experience is about the wait, or more aptly, experience *is* only when it is deferred.

This Derridean conception of experience and its implied understanding of temporality is commonly assumed to be in opposition with a phenomenological description of equivalent phenomena. While it is valid to suggest that deconstruction has altered the phenomenological paradigm in significant and worthwhile ways, such an oppositional framework regarding the issues of experience and temporality is also considered to be applicable to the specific phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, the following quotation from *The Visible and the Invisible* has been cited as evidence of Merleau-Ponty's tacit dependence upon a temporality of presence:

> With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated (VI 151).

This suggestion that different dimensions of existence are opened with the first actual vision, contact, or pleasurable experience, has been taken to infer that these two philosophers conceive of the opening of experience in radically different terms, and also as evidence of a fundamental difference between them in their relation to temporality[140]. Considering Derrida's insistence that experience *is* only when it is deferred, and that what is really happening is always "to come", it seems that for him, the opening of the dimension of pleasurable experience, to contemplate a concrete example, consists not in the first actual pleasurable experience, but in the anticipation of this pleasurable experience. Pleasure, paradoxically, is to be found in the waiting for it, as no pleasure can ever be completely self-contained, or exhausted by the resources of any singular experience. Like the sign, it is persistently referring to other things and cannot ever be entirely satiated or controlled, and such themes have already been demonstrated in chapter three (cf. OG 150). For Merleau-Ponty, however, or so the story goes, it is inferred that the opposite position is the case: pleasure is awakened on being 'present' to pleasure. If this were Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's respective positions, then this problematic could not be easily resolved, except to suggest that Merleau-Ponty's work

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[139]Derrida, J., as cited in Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 22.

[140]This is the position espoused by Martin Dillon, who asserts that Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's different conceptions of temporality result in manifestly different treatments of embodiment, and even preclude Derrida being considered in terms of embodiment at all. See Dillon, M., "Temporality: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 189–212.

might actually be confined within a metaphysics of presence.

However, this apparent antinomy can also be dissected, even if we restrict this analysis to the particular passage in question. After all, Merleau-Ponty speaks of an initiation, which is a rite of passage and an entering into a habitual relation that revolves around our embodied situation in a world. More significantly, being initiated also involves waiting for somebody to bestow relevance upon the act in which we have situated ourselves, and the initiation is hence not an actual self-contained event. The lack of identity and the instability of an initiation, with its wait for some type of meaning to be conferred, is typical of all experiences, for even once the initiation is over, it is never really over, as it still requires recognition from others to have any meaning attributed to it.

Moreover, in the passage in question, Merleau-Ponty does not literally mean that such a situation applies only to the very first vision and the very first pleasure. All of our visions are, in a sense, a first vision, and there are infinitely varied pleasures; that is, pleasures of such and such a kind, and pleasures of another kind. More importantly, however, it is worth paying attention to Merleau-Ponty's contention that it is *not* the actual positing of a particular content that initiates and opens up aspects of existence for us. If it is not the concrete content of the pleasurable experience that is initiating, then there seems to be little alternative but to conclude that Merleau-Ponty is also referring to a temporality of waiting for that pleasure, which in turn also opens us towards other possible experiences. While the traditional phenomenological reduction almost exclusively emphasises the content of our perceptions/experiences, if vision itself is but an initiation without content as Merleau-Ponty suggests in the above quotation (that is, a relation to both the past and the future), clearly this does not involve an actual presence-to-self in the 'subjectivity' or the 'now' of which he speaks. Moreover, this also suggests that Derrida's and Merleau-Ponty's respective positions, even on issues like the temporality of experience, are not as divergent as many theorists presume.

Against this interpretation, it may be argued that Merleau-Ponty never explicitly suggests that what is really happening is always "to come", as Derrida consistently affirms, and this is certainly true, just as it is true that a certain deconstructive pressure has been applied to the remark of Merleau-Ponty's with which we have been concerned. There are some significant differences between their respective philosophical positions and this chapter would be loathe to efface these, particularly given that some of these

differences will also be the site of this thesis' dissatisfaction with aspects of Derridean deconstruction. What should be apparent, however, is that the differences between these two theorists cannot be adequately accounted for by simple postulations like phenomenologist versus post-structuralist, and this is largely because there are some important ways in which Merleau-Ponty's notion of a hyper-reflection actually pre-empted deconstruction. This chapter intends to have begun to destabilise the antinomy that characterises much of the literature concerning the relationship between these two thinkers, and in particular the idea that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty remains betrothed to the metaphysics of presence. In order to further these dual ambitions, it is time that invisibility and blindness, themes common to both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, were accorded the attention they deserve.

5b. The *Punctum Caecum*: *The Visible and the Invisible* and the *Memoirs of the Blind*

In exploring the problematic of drawing, Derrida's 1991 text, *Memoirs of the Blind*, considers issues that are more closely aligned with perception and sight than his philosophy has hitherto considered, and this provides the opportunity to consider his position in regard to some obviously phenomenological themes. After all, phenomenology has been widely recognised, and sometimes even criticised, for being the philosophy of sight *par excellence*[141]. *Memoirs of the Blind* brings Derrida into closer proximity with such themes, but he also imbues his descriptions of the perspective of the artist with an important twist, in that he insists upon the artist's necessary blindness. While such an assertion is undoubtedly both counter-intuitive and something of a challenge to the traditional phenomenological paradigm of sight, it is not so obviously a position that is in opposition to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. After all, invisibility has been a theme of some interest to Merleau-Ponty's work and he eventually decided upon the title *The Visible and the Invisible*, for what was intended to be his major philosophical text[142]. In this respect, it is unsurprising that *Memoirs of the Blind* is a text in which Derrida belatedly begins to appreciate the significance and import of Merleau-

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[141]This argument is a common one, but it is particularly obvious in Yeo, M., "Perceiving/Reading the Other: Ethical Dimensions" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, eds. Busch & Gallagher, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p 44. Yeo argues that an emphasis upon vision is an inadequate and "remarkably bizarre way to stage the scene of our encounter with the other". A similar discontent is also apparent in Vasseleu, C., *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Lévinas and Merleau-Ponty*, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy, London: Routledge, 1998, p 64–9.

Ponty's philosophy, and this section of this chapter will consider Derrida's argument that blindness is constitutively involved in drawing, before elaborating on the relationship that this bears to Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy.

Memoirs of the Blind is orientated around an exhibition of drawings that Derrida curated at the Louvre, and he intends to reveal a blindness at the centre of the point of view, as evidenced through drawing and the self-portrait, and this blindness will be what calls into question 'perception', at least as it is usually conceived. Derrida's attempt to reveal an aporia involving the perspective in an irremediable blindness revolves around the positing of two different hypotheses about the act of drawing, then showing that both of these hypotheses fail on their own terms, and yet when taken together a spread of invisibility is still involved in the act of drawing, as well as the perspective more generally.

Derrida's first hypothesis is termed the abocular hypothesis and it conceives of the drawing of an object as being accomplished predominantly without the eyes – that is, with the eyes not focusing on the inscriptions upon the canvas, but upon the thing being traced itself. In this model of drawing, the hand rushes ahead without seeing, leaping without looking, and is hence on the verge of disaster (MB 4). It feels blindly through the darkness, somehow *precipitated* by the vision upon which one is staring. However, it is infinitely difficult to draw entirely from observing only the object, rather than one's inscriptions on the canvas. If any of you have ever tested this, you will agree that it could only be the most avant-garde of art forms! The body is not so well-trained that it can replicate the object without persistent references to and from.

The second hypothesis that explores this problematic revolves around a model of drawing in which one looks from the object to the canvas and then begins to draw. In this paradigm, one is relying on memory, but according to Derrida, references to memory cannot resolve this problem either – the memory is not the same as the thing being traced, but is, on the contrary, a representation and hence subject to the processes of *différance*. At the very least, it is apparent that an alterity insinuates itself precisely where the artist is trying to do away with anything that might appear arbitrary. Memory, or recalling something, does not merely capture the perception anew.

According to this second alternative, which Derrida refers to as the double genitive hypothesis, we draw according to a logic of *anticipation*. In other words, we

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[142]Merleau-Ponty's final work was at one stage entitled "The Origin of Truth" (VI 165).

draw while looking at the canvas (rather than the object being traced), and move our hands, *anticipating* their movements to conform to the model of the object that we possess in our memory (MB 4). In anticipating, we take the initiative, move out in front of, and as Robert Vallier suggests, this type of embodied anticipation "guards against the precipitous, vertiginous terror of the invisible"[143]. So in drawing we can attempt to escape from the nuances of invisibility by immersing ourselves in embodiment and in the anticipating leap of the hand. This type of drawer may try and get that elusive vision down quickly before it fades from memory, or they may be so painstakingly preoccupied with what they are drawing that the object itself ceases to be a reference factor. There is hence a type of faith evident, and a certain fidelity to either the memory of the thing, or to the drawing itself, and they are not as apprehensive about space as Derrida's imagined protagonists of the first hypothesis are. However, it quickly becomes obvious that one cannot adequately trace an object in this manner and while these practical considerations are not the main focus of Derrida's analysis, they do reveal the paradoxicality involved in abandoning the perception and drawing entirely due to memory, "as if one drew on the condition of not seeing" (MB 49).

This dual position can be summarised as follows: when the draftsperson looks at the object being painted and moves the pencil, they draw precipitively; when they look at the canvas and not the object being drawn (and hence rely upon memory), the artist draws anticipatively. Derrida's point is that either way there is always a blindness involved, and his question is that if blindness is a condition of the possibility of drawing (and concurrently also reflects its impossibility), then how is drawing possible? In responding to this paradoxical situation, Derrida argues that these two different hypotheses (the abocular and the double genitive, or roughly, eye before hand, or hand before eye) are intertwined, and "between the two, in their fold, the one repeating the other without being reduced to it, there is the event" (MB 41). The act of drawing, and the perspective itself, hence involves the interdependency of both of these hypotheses.

Without analysing Merleau-Ponty's own writings on aesthetics in his essays "Cézanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind" respectively[144], it is clear that his ontology also

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[143]Vallier, R., p 194. It needs to be acknowledged that I am indebted to Vallier for pointing out this connection between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on the theme of the *punctum caecum*, although I will disagree with some aspects of his interpretation.

[144]It is worth recognising that in "Eye and Mind", Merleau-Ponty argues that "vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself... Painters always knew this" (PrP 184).

argues that it is only in the fold between the sentient and the sensible, in their chiasmic intertwining, that experience (including the artistic event) is possible at all. As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty neither the experience of touching or the experience of being touched are conceivable on their own, but can be recognised only if the awareness of what it feels like to be touched encroaches upon the experience of touching (VI 148, cf. PP 93). It is only between these two abstractions, "in the fold" between touching and being touched, that either of these things can actually occur. It seems that both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida discern a necessary divergence within our everyday embodiment and the situation of the artist respectively. Moreover, subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty, and the perspective for Derrida, are both made (im)possible by this very difference (*écart*) that cannot simply be characterised as yet another dualism. In this respect, it is interesting to note that both of these philosophers make persistent references to the fold, the hinge, and the chiasm; all images that seek to retain a difference between two terms, but it is a difference that cannot be adequately characterised in the form of a dualistic opposition[145].

In regard to *Memoirs of the Blind*, however, the question arises as to what occurs in this interim, the between of looking at the object and then 'tracing' it to paper? As Vallier points out, in this hiatus (which is not a literal self-enclosed moment), in the fold of these two directed gazes, is a spread of invisibility that makes drawing both possible and impossible[146]. There is a feeling of powerlessness, according to Derrida, at these moments when we realise that the experience of the gaze is given over to blindness, and it is a blindness that can only be resolved through leaping. Now, Derrida acknowledges the common-sense argument against him. He says:

> If one can recall no blind draftsperson, that is, one deprived of sight and eyes in the literal sense, isn't it going against common sense... to claim exactly the opposite, ie. that every draftsperson is blind? No one will dispute that the draftsperson is prey to a devouring proliferation of the invisible, but is that enough to make him into a blind man? (MB 44)

Perhaps it is going against common sense to claim a blindness at the heart of vision, but

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[145]This apparent proximity between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, in terms of the extent to which both theorists emphasise a chiasmic intertwining of two disparate hypotheses, will be further examined in chapter ten. It will be argued that Derrida is more reluctant to thematise this intertwining than Merleau-Ponty, and this fits in with Martin Dillon's argument that Merleau-Ponty and Derrida actually use the figure of the chiasm in importantly different ways (see Dillon, M., "Introduction" in *Écart and Différance*, p 6–7).

[146]Vallier, R., p 194–5.

that has rarely stopped philosophers previously and in this regard at least, Derrida is no exception. Nevertheless, it is clear that the blindness he is referring to is not a problematic retina, but the necessary redirection of the gaze for drawing to occur. It is, however, tempting to insist that a 'mastery of technique' type explanation would suffice, and is in opposition to Derrida's portrait of the inherent paradoxicalities of drawing. In other words, it may be claimed that we successfully draw because we have previously been trained to do so. In this respect, it is worth noting that both of Derrida's hypotheses are heavily reliant upon the hands and the body, and it is no surprise that the hands and the body would orient drawings of the blind – this is something that Derrida accepts and it might seem to prioritise the practical and habitual exigencies of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject and its "I can" relationship to the things surrounding it (PP 137). After all, it is the body that inaugurates these provisional sketches, that leaps across the chasm of blindness and seeks to restore something approaching an equilibrium – in this case, the approximation of the seen object to that drawn on paper. Derrida is not going to deny this, but he does want to suggest that no matter how well-trained an individual may be in the art of sketching, there is nevertheless a moment between when they are looking at the thing they are trying to trace and when their hand actually begins to 'trace' the object, where blindness ensues.

Regarding this blindness, or space of difference between the object and its traced representation, Derrida suggests that:

> The night of the abyss can be interpreted in two ways, either as the eve or memory of the day, in other words as a reserve of visibility (the draftsman does not presently see but he has seen and will see again: the aperspective is the anticipating perspective or the anamestic retrospective) or as radically and definitively foreign to the phenomenality of the day (MB 45).

Derrida rejects the first memory model and its reserve of visibility that would render the night as nothing but the absence of the day. Such a position seems to re-inscribe an unwanted dualism, and Derrida's claim is more than merely that there are occasions when our perspective is compromised by blindness; he wants to suggest that this blindness is always there and is actually an integral factor in the possibility of sight at all. Derrida hence chooses the latter option, but this idea of the invisible being radically and definitively foreign to the phenomenality of the day is not to suggest that it has no interaction with that phenomenality, or that it resides in some dualistic, ephemeral,

external outside (although it admittedly sounds that way). Rather, it means, as Vallier suggests, that "the draftsperson is always in danger of ruination at the 'origin' of drawing because the 'heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible, can haunt the visible as its very possibility'"[147]. Rather than assuming phenomenality to be transparent, Derrida implies that it is on account of the difference between the invisible and the visible, that vision is itself possible.

This is a thought that is remarkably similar to Merleau-Ponty's own account of perception, and Hugh Silverman puts his fundamental point well: "Merleau-Ponty took the model of the ruin of a castle left in shambles on the top of a hill. The ruin is visible. What is invisible is the whole castle, as it was, as it could be in the future. Its visibility is the intertwining of the visible and the invisible"[148]. It is the last sentence of this quotation that is important, for while only the ruin is literally visible, the visibility that we perceive is not merely the visible (eg. the ruins), but also the invisible (eg. a proud 13th-century castle manned with guards at every corner). Moreover, like Derrida, Merleau-Ponty insists that the fact that we perceive at all is indebted to this difference between the visible and the invisible.

If it is the difference between visibility and invisibility that makes vision itself possible, then as Derrida suggests, this has the consequence of necessitating that:

> Invisibility would still inhabit the visible, or rather, would haunt it to the point of being confused with it... The visible as such would be invisible, not as visibility, the phenomenality or essence of the visible, but *as* the singular body of the visible itself, right on the visible (MB 51).

This idea of the invisible being right on the visible is also intimately related to Merleau-Ponty, as Vallier has argued in his essay comparing *Memoirs of the Blind* to *The Visible and the Invisible*. Moreover, in the above statement, Derrida seems to discard completely the notion of the phenomenality of the day, and replace it with a conception of 'experience' that incorporates the invisible and the visible together, and is paradoxically also predicated upon their divergence. As he explains, "to be the other of the visible, absolute invisibility must neither take place elsewhere nor constitute another visible" (MB 52) – rather, it must be right on the visible, and it is this aporia that the artist must confront, and as we have already seen, it is usually accompanied by a feeling of

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[147]Vallier, R., p 197.
[148]Silverman, H., "Reading Postmodernism as Interruption" in *Écart and Différance*, ed. Dillon, New

powerlessness.

Significantly, however, Derrida makes it clear that this moment of "powerlessness is not an impotence or a failure" (MB 44). In fact, it is all pervasive and makes possible the artistic experience, because the invisible "is at once that which sustains and ailments... the visible, the conditions of its possibility, and that which threatens the visible with wreck and ruination, the conditions of its impossibility"[149]. In this suggestion that the aporia of invisibility is not only negative but also creative and instantiating, Derrida once more moves closer towards the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, a similar divergence is envisaged to preclude self-presence (*écart*), but it is nevertheless also considered to be a "fruitful contradiction" in that it allows some form of subjectivity to be possible at all (cf. PrP 134). Rather than acting as transcendental conditions that are sufficient and enabling, Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's respective concepts (*écart* and aporia) are hence more accurately described as quasi-transcendental conditions, in that they ensure that the effect that is made possible is also made unstable[150]. Before such a claim can be legitimised in more detail, however, Merleau-Ponty's own conception of this invisibility needs to be examined.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explicitly suggests that his governing principle is "not to consider the invisible as another visible possible" (VI 229), just as Derrida was careful to avoid consigning his own invisible (the night of the abyss) as being merely the eve or memory of the day. Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the invisible is not of the order of visibility also seems to problematise – although not entirely refute – one of the claims of Leonard Lawlor in his essay, "Eliminating Some Confusion: The Relation of Being and Writing in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida". Lawlor's essay characterises Merleau-Ponty as almost exclusively concerned with the conditions of possibility, whereas Derrida is envisaged as being concerned only with impossibility[151]. Now, it cannot be denied that Derrida examines impossibility to a more significant and sustained extent than Merleau-Ponty, and Lawlor is hence pointing towards an important difference between these two thinkers that will concern us in chapters nine and ten. However, it also needs to be pointed out that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the invisible is

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Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, p 216.

[149]Vallier, R., p 198.

[150]This distinction between the transcendental and the quasi-transcendental is indebted to Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 12.

[151]Lawlor, L., "Eliminating Some Confusion: The Relation of Being and Writing in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida" in *Écart and Différance*, ed. Dillon, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, p 84.

not merely another *possible* visibility (VI 229), but it is "there without being an object, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask. And the 'visibles' themselves, in the last analysis... are only centered on a nucleus of absence" (VI 229). It seems then, at least from the evidence of his "Working Notes", that Merleau-Ponty explores the relationship of the impossible to the possible, rather than simply affirming the one paradigm at the expense of the other as Lawlor implies. There is a radicality to Merleau-Ponty's position that ensures that he is not exclusively preoccupied with possibility, and that he is hence also not obviously a metaphysician of presence. For example, in the "Working Notes", he suggests that:

> When I say that every visible is invisible, that perception is imperception, that consciousness has a "*punctum caecum*", that to see is always to see more than one sees – this must not be understood in the sense of a contradiction – it must not be imagined that I add to the visible, perfectly defined in-itself, a non-visible... one has to understand that it is the visibility itself, that involves a non-visibility (VI 247).

This mutual inextricability of visibility from invisibility, imperception from perception, is also what Derrida has been exploring through his insistence that the invisible is right on the visible (without being reduced to it). On realising this curious coming together, Derrida proposes an "entire re-reading of the later Merleau-Ponty" (MB 52). As should be obvious, this re-reading is one that is closely aligned with his own purposes and it again reveals a proximity between the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, although a question or two remain to be asked about their respective conceptions of this invisibility.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty makes clear, at least in the main textual body of *The Visible and the Invisible*, that what he is not propounding is "an absolute invisible which would have nothing to do with the visible" (VI 151). This, however, is a position that Derrida does incline towards in *Memoirs of the Blind*. While Robert Vallier has sought to brush off the significance of this discrepancy by claiming, with some validity, that much of Merleau-Ponty's "Working Notes" are closer to the Derridean conception of an absolute invisibility than his more finished text is[152], I do not think that this actually accounts for the full extent of their differences. In fact, I would argue the reverse: where Derrida begins to be preoccupied with an absolute invisibility (and this is only occasionally the case) he abandons Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic conception of visibility and

invisibility that actually precludes the one ever being considered in isolation from the other. This is an important difference, for although Derrida only infrequently thematises this absolute invisibility that might have nothing whatsoever to do with visibility, the second half of this thesis will reveal an analogous problem in his conception of alterity. It will be argued that while Merleau-Ponty retains a chiasmic conception of alterity in which the other is always partially intertwined with the self, Derrida's ultimately emphasises the way in which the other eludes the grasp of any self-other dialectic.

Such themes will be returned to, but for the moment Merleau-Ponty's conception of invisibility needs be interrogated in more depth. In this respect, it is interesting to recognise that Merleau-Ponty makes persistent references to the "*punctum caecum*" (VI 247), which refers to a physiological blind spot on the retina that does not see itself but in fact makes seeing possible (although always also ambiguous and problematic). As he explains:

> What it [*the punctum caecum*] does not see, it does not see for reasons of a principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. What it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the next... What it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible (*my italics*, VI 248).

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is hence a constituting blindness that makes vision possible and this is what traditional dialectics fails to recognise. These radical elements of his work are not always appreciated by commentators[153], but other than using terms like consciousness and Being, his position again appears to be closely related to Derrida's, notwithstanding the one important difference between them that has just been adumbrated – ie. that Derrida occasionally flirts with a more absolute and asymmetrical conception of invisibility. Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that what consciousness "does not see, is that in it which prepares the vision of the next" is particularly enigmatic, and while his untimely death means that it is difficult to know in exactly what direction Merleau-Ponty would have pursued this thought, it is worth recognising that this comment still maintains an embodied resonance. After all, he argues that "what it [*consciousness*] does not see, is its tie to Being, its corporeity", so what prepares for the vision of the next is

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[152]Vallier, R., p 201.
[153]Martin Dillon pays the "Working Notes" less attention than many other commentators on Merleau-Ponty's work, and this is largely because they conflict with the somewhat less radical interpretation of Merleau-Ponty that he propounds.

our own corporeity. Moreover, we have already quoted Derrida suggesting that "the invisible is the *body* of the visible itself" (M 51), and such sentiments owe a lot to Merleau-Ponty and his more literal notion of the body which can only very ambiguously discern its relation to the world. Because the body is that which allows for any form of perspective at all, there can be no Archimedean vantage point from which one can overcome the constitutive blindness of our own irremediable subjectivity. As a point of view (the only point of view), the body is blind to itself to an important extent.

For Merleau-Ponty, we cannot even see ourselves properly when confronting a mirror (PP 92), and this seems to be phenomenologically accurate. Gaining an apprehension of our own appearance is infinitely more difficult than apprehending another, and in this respect one can understand the philosophical efficacy of Antoine Roquentin's prolonged struggle to look at himself in Sartre's novel, *Nausea*. We can never really see ourselves, because the self *is* only by dehiscence, and in this respect it is worth acknowledging that *Memoirs of the Blind* is subtitled *The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. As the title suggests, to a large extent Derrida's text is focused on exhibiting the impossibility of a self-portrait that would adequately grasp its subject, as well as in revealing the difficulties inherent in any and every self-perception.

Moreover, this "*punctum caecum*", this constituting blindness, is also that which encourages Merleau-Ponty to "raise the question of the invisible life, the invisible community, the invisible other, the invisible culture... (and to) elaborate a phenomenology of the other world" (VI 229). As an encapsulation of his project for the uncompleted remainder of *The Visible and the Invisible*, this also seems to be an apt summary of Derrida's own project. If this is not immediately apparent, it is worth recalling that what is proper to a culture, according to Derrida in "Signature, Event, Context", is "not to be identical to itself" (M 195). In other words, a culture must ensure that its identity is questionable, flexible, and recognise what else it might be and could yet be (ie. the invisible of that culture).

Interrogating this type of invisibility was to be a major aspect of Merleau-Ponty's unfinished project, and he argues that it is an important one:

> Precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. This does not even exclude the possibility that we may find in our experience a movement towards what could not, in any event, be present to us in the original, and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences (VI

159).

This movement he describes towards "what could not, in any event, be present to us in the original" is, as has been widely recognised, a thought that pre-empts some major aspects of Derrida's own thought, most obvious among these being the notion of the trace which, as David Wood suggests, is about a past that can never be fully reactivated and that was never entirely present[154]. As with the Derridean notion of the trace, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon the possibility of this irremediable absence seems to be a deliberate attempt to circumvent the insistence upon presence that has dominated much of the philosophical tradition. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, however, Merleau-Ponty also defines his later phenomenology as being focused upon the other of experience in order to open us to what is not ourselves. This stretches the boundaries of what can be conceived of as phenomenology. After all, what Merleau-Ponty seeks now is not merely to return to the phenomenon, but to return to the phenomenon in a way open to that which makes the phenomena itself possible and yet also problematic; the invisible and the *écart* (although these are not synonymous) that allows phenomenality to be possible at all. While debate on Merleau-Ponty's eventual relationship to phenomenology continues – according to the man himself, his later project was still within the purview of a broadly interpreted phenomenology – it suffices to establish that this is not diametrically opposed to Derrida's own tempestuous relationship with phenomenology. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests that his later philosophy is based upon showing how communication with others goes beyond perception (EW 367–8) and deconstruction might be aptly described as a summons to the other that has abandoned the vocabulary of perception. Much remains to be considered in regard to their significantly different treatments of alterity, but it is worth pointing out that while deconstruction in some ways transcends phenomenology, in other respects it is also surreptitiously betrothed to it. Notwithstanding Derrida's repeated efforts to distance himself from this tradition, there are some important ways in which his thought is precariously poised at the margins of phenomenology, and more obviously philosophy, in a manner not entirely unlike the later writings of Merleau-Ponty.

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[154]Wood, D., *The Deconstruction of Time*, p 271.

6. Habituality and Undecidability: A Comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on the Decision.

While Merleau-Ponty and Derrida have both engaged in a critique of the dualistic and hierarchical tendencies of what has come to be called the philosophy of reflection, they have employed vastly different concepts, methodologies, and styles in criticising this relatively similar target[155]. This chapter will compare and contrast two of their most apparently disparate motifs: the embodied habituality that typifies Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, and the 'undecidability' that is a major concern of Derrida's later writings. To schematically introduce the problem, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the body-subject's tendency to seek an equilibrium with the world (by acquiring skills) and towards deciding in an embodied and habitual manner that minimises any confrontation with a decision-making aporia. On the other hand, Derrida frequently points towards a constitutive undecidability that is involved in all decision-making. He insists that a decision, if it is to genuinely be a decision, must involve a leap beyond all prior preparations for it. One must always decide without any equilibrium or stability, and yet these are precisely the things that Merleau-Ponty claims that our body inclines us towards. The majority of this chapter will explore the significance of this dissension, and while it is not an either/or situation in which one philosopher is obviously right and the other wrong, it will be argued that many of Merleau-Ponty's insights do challenge aspects of Derrida's characterisation of the undecidability involved in decision-making. Before entertaining any such conclusion, however, this skeletal outline needs to be filled in.

The notion of undecidability is not explicitly thematised in *Of Grammatology* but it is a concept that depends upon the analysis contained therein. Undecidability, in its first and probably most famous instantiation, is one of Derrida's most important attempts to trouble dualisms, or more accurately, to reveal how they are always already troubled. An undecidable, and there are many of them in deconstruction (eg. ghost, pharmakon, hymen, etc.), is something that cannot conform to either polarity of a dichotomy (eg. present/absent, cure/poison, and inside/outside in the above examples).

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[155]Given Derrida's fascination with the 'philosophical' significance of the 'stylistic' aspects of Nietzsche's writing (and the way in which philosophical and stylistic concerns can never actually be neatly separated out as I have just attempted to do), this difference between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida can hardly be dismissed.

However, Derrida has a recurring tendency to resuscitate terms in new and different contexts (a kind of self-referential paleonymy), and the term undecidability also returns from the dead in later deconstruction. Indeed, to complicate matters, undecidability returns in two discernible forms. In his more recent work, Derrida often insists that the condition of the possibility of mourning, giving, forgiving, and hospitality, to cite some of his most famous examples, is at once also the condition of their impossibility. In his explorations of these "possible-impossible" aporias (which are examined at length in chapter ten) it becomes undecidable whether genuine giving, for example, is either a possible or an impossible ideal.

More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, however, the various ruminations of Derrida's later philosophy are also united by his analysis of a similar type of undecidability that is involved in the concept of the decision itself, and it is this particular undecidable problematic that will be the focus of this comparison with Merleau-Ponty. In this respect, Derrida regularly suggests that a decision cannot be wise, or posed even more provocatively, that the instant of the decision must actually be mad (DPJ 26, GD 65). Drawing on Kierkegaard, Derrida tells us that a decision requires an undecidable leap beyond all prior preparations for that decision (GD 77), and according to him, this applies to all decisions and not just those regarding the conversion to religious faith that preoccupies Kierkegaard. To pose the problem in inverse fashion, it might be suggested that for Derrida, all decisions are a faith and a tenuous faith at that, since were faith and the decision not tenuous, they would cease to be a faith or a decision at all (cf. GD 80). This description of the decision as a moment of madness that must somehow move beyond rationality and calculative reasoning may seem paradoxical, but it might nevertheless be agreed that a decision requires a 'leap of faith' beyond the sum total of the facts. Many of us are undoubtedly stifled by the inherent difficulty of decision-making, and this psychological fact aids and, for his detractors, also abets Derrida's discussion of the decision as it appears in otherwise distantly related texts, including *The Gift of Death*, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, and *Politics of Friendship*.

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, Derrida argues that a decision must always come back to the other, even if it is the other 'inside' the subject, and he disputes that an initiative which remained purely and simply "mine" would still be a decision (AEL 23–4). A theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision (PF 68–9),

because, as he rhetorically asks, "would we not be justified in seeing here the unfolding of an egological immanence, the autonomic and automatic deployment of predicates or possibilities proper to a subject, without the tearing rupture that should occur in every decision we call free?" (AEL 24). In other words, if a decision is envisaged as simply following from certain character attributes, then it would not genuinely be a decision, and Derrida is hence once more insisting upon the necessity of a leap beyond calculative reasoning, and beyond the resources of some self-contained subject reflecting upon the matter at hand. A decision must invoke alterity – that which is outside of the subject's control – and these Lévinasian-inspired sentiments will be considered in greater detail as this chapter progresses.

For the moment, however, it is worth pointing out that if a decision is yet another example of a concept that is simultaneously impossible within its own internal logic and yet nevertheless necessary, then not only is our reticence to decide rendered philosophically cogent, but it is even privileged. Indeed, Derrida's work has been described as a "philosophy of hesitation"[156], and his most famous neologism, *différance*, explicitly emphasises deferring, with all of the procrastination that this term implies[157]. In his early essay "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida also suggests that a successful deconstructive reading is conditional upon the suspension of choice; on hesitating – in a manner not dissimilar to the "agonised serenity" that Albert Camus describes in *The Rebel*[158] – between the ethical opening and the logocentric totality (WD 84). Even though Derrida has suggested that he is reluctant to use the term 'ethics' because of logocentric associations[159], one is hence led to conclude that 'ethical' behaviour (for want of a better word) is a product of deferring, and of being forever open to possibilities rather than taking a definitive position.

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[156]Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p 42.

[157]As has been frequently discussed, *différance* is an attempt to conjoin differing and deferring, and to make these temporal and spatial aspects inextricably intertwined.

[158]Camus, A., *The Rebel*, trans. Bower, Penguin Books, 1951, p 266. In some important respects, Camus can be understood as exhibiting a certain post-structuralist relevance in this text, and arguably as also providing a more satisfactory position than many of his successors. In particular, Camus' advocation of rebellion rather than revolution, and of the state of mind that accompanies rebellion – an "agonised serenity" that is both an urgent, agonised demand for the moment, and simultaneously serene in such a way as to preclude this demand becoming a self-enclosed moment in which the revolution is enacted – seems to be closely related to the distinction that Derrida draws between the messianic and messianism. Like Derrida's conception of the messianic, Camus' rebellion proceeds without a grand telos or intent that the messiah should arrive (which would be a messianism), but involves a perpetual openness towards the future, a rebellion that is not quite a revolution (which inevitably installs a concrete messiah and kills in 'his' name). More needs to be said about this connection, but this will have to suffice for the present work.

[159]Critchley, S., p 12.

The problem of undecidability is hence apparent even before Derrida had explicitly thematised the term, and it is also evident in more recent texts including *The Gift of Death*. In this text, Derrida seems to support the sacrificing of a certain notion of ethics and universality for a conception of radical singularity not unlike that evinced by the "hyper-ethical" sacrifice that Abraham makes of his son upon Mt Moriah, according to both the Judaic and Christian religions alike (GD 71). To represent Derrida's position a little more precisely, true responsibility consists in vacillating between the demands of that which is wholly other (in Abraham's case, God, but also any particular other) and the more general demands of a community. Responsibility is enduring this trial of the undecidable decision, where attending to the call of a particular other will inevitably demand an estrangement from the "other others" and their communal needs. Whatever decision one may take, according to Derrida, it can never be wholly justified (GD 70), and it is hence not surprising that in *The Gift of Death* he reveals a certain kind of admiration for Abraham's persistent refusal to attempt to justify his pact with the wholly other, the *tout autre*.

Of course, Derrida's emphasis upon the undecidability inherent in all decision-making does not want to convey inactivity or a quietism of despair, and he has insisted that the madness of the decision also demands urgency and precipitation (DPJ 25–8). Nevertheless, what is undergone is described as the "trial of undecidability" (LI 210) and what is involved in enduring this trial would seem to be a relatively anguished being. In an interview with Richard Beardsworth, Derrida characterises the problem of undecidability as follows:

> However careful one is in the theoretical preparation of a decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the decision not know everything... the decision, if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated[160].

This suggestion that the decision cannot anticipate the future is undoubtedly somewhat counter-intuitive. The capacity to decide at least appears to depend upon anticipation (through our embodied situation and previous experiences), even if it is true that the

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[160]Beardsworth, R., "Nietzsche and the Machine: Interview with Jacques Derrida" in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 7, Spring 1994, p 37–8.

results that are anticipated are unlikely to be forthcoming. While such sentiments will be pursued in greater depth as this chapter progresses, Derrida's rejection of anticipation is not only a rejection of the traditional idea of deciding on the basis of weighing-up and internally representing certain options. By suggesting that anticipation is not possible, he means to make the more general point that no matter how we may anticipate, any decision must always rupture those anticipatory frameworks, even if those frameworks are simply the habitual structures that inform our corporeal comportment towards the world.

Derrida's main intention is hence to insist once more that a decision must be fundamentally different from any prior preparations for it. He would also argue that this need not entail asserting that the relationship between a decision, and the experience or knowledge that has situated that decision, can separate into precisely delineated realms in which 'facticity' has no conversation with our transcendent capacity to freely decide. Deconstruction is not a revised version of Sartre's governing duality in which Being-for-itself asserts authority over Being-in-itself. On the contrary, no ontological distinction between a decision and what is actually external to that decision could ever legitimately be made by deconstruction, much less the according of one term of the duality a priority over the other. Does existence precede essence? "How can one tell?" would be Derrida's first and most important response to such a question, although a further question will be whether his analysis nevertheless presupposes a neat and discrete distinction between what prepares for a decision and the decision itself, even if exactly what this distinction is can never be specified.

Deferring such a question, Derrida's conception of the decision is fundamentally different from that of Sartre in at least one important respect. His enigmatic assertion that the decision must invoke alterity has already been cited, but in *Politics of Friendship*, he again suggests that the decision must "surprise the very subjectivity of the subject" (PF 68). In expanding upon this suggestion, he argues that far from returning us to any sovereign conception of free-will, what needs to be considered is the fundamentally "passive" aspect of a decision that is always made for the other (PF 69). He eventually concludes: "*in sum, the decision is unconscious* – insane as that may seem, it involves the unconscious but is nevertheless responsible" (PF 69). Derrida is hence clearly not

returning us to a Sartrean paradigm of the activity and projects of the for-itself[161]. On the contrary, the reason that the decision cannot be anticipated is because it is always partially unconscious (a formulation Sartre would not accept), and this suggests that our conscious reflections must always be abandoned for the realm of madness in deciding. Moreover, it is in making this leap away from calculative reasoning that Derrida argues that responsibility consists (PF 69). However, despite this emphasis, he does not want to accept an account of decision-making that can be influenced by our habitual and pre-reflexive comportment towards the world (which would seem to be closely related to the unconscious life), and this undecidability that he discerns is envisaged as permeating basically all aspects of our existence (GD 24).

At a certain level, it is difficult to argue with this emphasis upon the aporia that necessarily surrounds all decision-making. Like his focus upon the iterability of language in texts like *Limited Inc.*, Derrida's analysis of the decision focuses upon the way in which no one particular decision can be envisaged as necessary, and it also implies that every situation that can be encountered is different and even unique. A decision cannot rely upon previous explorations, or any form of knowledge, and this ensures that every action must endure this later version of undecidability, particularly that which seeks to be just or morally approbatious.

Now, the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty might not seem to be overly relevant to such philosophical terrain. It is sometimes even claimed that he ignores the decision, and hence ignores the aporias that it may introduce[162]. Elsewhere such a position has been refuted (see chapter two), but it cannot be denied that decision-making is rarely his explicit focus. In his favour, it can be pointed out that he has repeatedly expressed discontent with the conceptions of authenticity evident in philosophers like Heidegger and Sartre. According to Merleau-Ponty, they over-emphasise an individualistic decision-making paradigm in which authentic projects can be freely chosen. Such considerations will not be the main focus of this chapter, however, which will instead examine several important implications that his account of embodiment has for decision-making, and for the aporia that Derrida associates with it.

Merleau-Ponty's fundamental suggestion in this regard, is that "whether a system

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[161]At least in this minimal respect, I hence disagree with Christina Howells who argues that Sartre's and Derrida's respective conceptions of subjectivity are much closer than is commonly presumed. See Howells, C., *Derrida: From Phenomenology to Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, p 135.
[162]Barral, M., *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of the Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations*, p 115.

of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an 'I think', it is a group of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium" (PP 153). This somewhat innocuous looking statement might not appear to challenge Derrida's conception of the undecidability that is inherent in all decision-making, but I think that when imbued with further details this is precisely what it can accomplish. Merleau-Ponty describes the body-subject as perpetually seeking to cultivate certain behavioural structures in order to minimise confrontations, aporias, and the like. More specifically, he argues that we develop habitual modes of interacting, and of deciding, in an attempt to attain this equilibrium and stability.

This search for an equilibrium cannot simply be conflated with the sedimentation of meaning, or with a nostalgic desire for immanence. According to Merleau-Ponty, our embodied need to attain an equilibrium within our environment often means that decisions are made on the basis of what he calls an "intentional arc", which subtends the life of an individual consciousness and "projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation" (PP 136). He hence acknowledges a necessary rupture of sedimented meanings (and to some extent, the decision correlatively involves a leap beyond immanent subjectivity), but this does not also necessitate a rupture of our embodied and habitual comportment towards the world, which he describes in far more positive terms than as a simple sedimentation.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty often synonymously exchanges the term 'habit' for skilful action (cf. PP 143). He also tells us that in habitual activity the body "understands" (PP 144), and the intentional arc that he describes is supposed to embody the interconnection of skilful action (ie. habit) and perception (PP 136). This will become clearer as this chapter progresses, but this embodied habituality that he depicts is certainly not a mere mechanistic propensity to decide in a certain way. Rather, it is an insistence that, to a large extent, we decide through our bodies, and that our bodies inevitably move towards an equilibrium with the world in which they partake.

Before exploring Merleau-Ponty's conception of this embodied habituality any further, however, it is worth observing that something not entirely unrelated to Derridean undecidability does ensue in his philosophy. It has repeatedly been suggested that his philosophy, like Simone de Beauvoir's, is one typified by ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty tells us that ambiguity must pervade our embodied situation because reflection can neither recuperate everything, nor return us to pre-reflective experience and the perceptual faith

(VI 35, 99 cf. PP 208, 345). Ambiguity is a condition of being a perspective on the world and yet being blind to that perspective, and this problem is compounded by the paradoxical status of the body-subject, which being an amalgam of both subject and object ensures that it is always ambiguous whether a decision, or a perception, can be traced back to the subject or to the world.

Generally, however, this notion of ambiguity is taken to be importantly distinct from what Derrida conveys through his concept of undecidability. According to one critic, "Merleau-Ponty's ambiguity supposes relative continuity, whereas undecidability supposes the relative discontinuity"[163]. Similarly, when speaking of the way the trace is simultaneously both present and absent (or equally accurately, is neither present nor absent) in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that "one should not call this ambiguity, but rather its play (for the word ambiguity requires the logic of presence even where it begins to disobey that logic)" (OG 71). While this opposition between the concepts of ambiguity and undecidability seems somewhat exaggerated, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does downplay the significance of something like the deconstructive emphasis upon the undecidability involved in the decision.

If undecidability is well described as a compulsion to act, as both John Caputo and Derrida at times imply[164], it is a compulsion to act precisely without any equilibrium or stability and yet these are the very things that Merleau-Ponty argues that our body moves us towards, even, and most importantly, in inaugurating a decision. To recapitulate, Merleau-Ponty argues that on mastering a certain technique and on acquiring embodied skills, certain scenarios begin to solicit our responses in a way that inclines us towards an equilibrium and to a situation that appears to involve decision-making processes without the type of aporia that Derrida associates with them. Much remains to be considered in this respect, but it should be apparent that this chapter will ask Derrida certain questions that are not commonly directed at him, and these will be about embodiment, habituality, and the effects they may have on the aporia that he discerns.

It is worth repeating that Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of habitual activity are not intended to be construed in an essentialist manner which deprives experience of its openness and fundamental ambiguity by insisting that humanity is behaviouristically determined. Rather, they are an attempt to affirm that it is our embodied situation that

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[163]Lawlor, L., "Eliminating Some Confusion", p 82.
[164]I have previously cited a quote from Derrida, and also see Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques*

predisposes us towards a certain course of action, and that it is in relation to our previous bodily experiences that we anticipate the best possible mode of action in a flexible and constantly evolving way. The significant point to extract from this is that the body-subject inevitably seeks to minimise aporias, confrontations, and anything that might disrupt its "intentional arc" towards the world (PP 136, 153, 250). Of course, this can never be accomplished completely, and there is no possible union between the body-subject and the world (VI 147–8), but there is a connection, and it is such that it allows us to slowly approximate towards what Wittgenstein refers to as a mastery of a technique[165]. This applies both in regard to the world at large, and more obviously in relation to those activities that we are most consistently immersed in.

While Derrida has been critical of the phenomenological emphasis upon immediacy since his first published book on Husserl, it is not obvious that his criticisms of phenomenology generally, and of Husserl and Heidegger in particular, should unequivocally also involve a denunciation of the type of divided immediacy (based in repetition) about which Merleau-Ponty speaks. For Merleau-Ponty, the habitual action is not based merely in a temporality of the present, and yet nor is it restricted only to the past. The 'presence' of habituality is built upon our past-learned skill that is still in play, and which, nevertheless, must also open us to slightly different and unanticipated scenarios. So even the mode of existence in which we unthinkingly react partakes in a previous existence that has engendered certain results. This is what allows us to anticipate eventual outcomes, and yet it also necessitates precipitation and the hastening of a coming event, and these two aspects mutually encroach such that we condition and alter the world, just as the world also conditions and produces us (PP 403).

The apparent 'presence' involved in behaving habitually is hence always internally divergent, requiring both anticipative and precipitative elements which never resolve themselves into any absolute stability that might be denigrated as conforming to the metaphysics of presence. Merleau-Ponty suggests that what "enables us to center our existence is also what prevents us from centering it completely" (PP 85), and in habitual activity the identity of the body is therefore both achieved and deferred. Were habitual action entirely present-to-itself and without this divergence (*écart*) that Merleau-Ponty

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Derrida, p 225 & 334.

[165]Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, Sections 150, 208–9.

theorises[166], then the body – somewhat like a robot incapable of deviating from its originary programming – would not have the capacity to adjust to different circumstances, to learn[167], or even to conceive of alterity at all, let alone to reabsorb it into an embodied equilibrium. Merleau-Ponty's conception of habituality is hence not opposed to change. In fact, to maintain an equilibrium within an environment that is changing, the body must change – to stay the same would be to induce instability in a rapidly multiplying world. So there is a strange, although somewhat Taoist logic here, in which something apparently unstable (change) is in fact the only original and stable 'nature' of which we can speak[168].

On a simple level, any one of us can bear witness to a multitude of habitual imperatives that have become ingrained in the background of our consciousness and very rarely considered. This must be partly why the notion of the unconscious and its power of explanation has so much allure. Without intending to subsume the unconscious under the umbrella of what Merleau-Ponty has referred to as 'habituality', it is important to recognise that, as Martin Dillon has put it, one of "the great truths of transcendental thought is that habitual forms are deeply sedimented in both cultures and individuals, that the *a priori* nature of these habits increases with degree of latency (ie. their potency to structure our lives is proportional to their taken-for-grantedness)"[169]. This would seem difficult to deny, but the point is not so much to simplistically denigrate these habitual modes of interaction, but to affirm that the tendency to form habits is an important aspect of human existence that enables us to deal with our world in a manner which need not be considered ignorant or non-reflective, but nevertheless does not involve the deliberate, calculative reflection that is commonly associated with thought. While Hegel exalted

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[166]While I am referring to the ontology of *The Visible and the Invisible*, which explicitly thematises the notion of an *écart*, or divergence, such a characterisation is also valid when applied to *Phenomenology of Perception*, where a similar ontology is often implied and presupposed. In this respect, I am sympathetic with Martin Dillon's characterisation of the differences between the early and late Merleau-Ponty, even if Dillon occasionally forces material into his account and ignores the more radical aspects of *The Visible and the Invisible's* "Working Notes" (see Dillon, M., *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). This account can be contrasted with that of Gary Madison, who posits a greater disparity between Merleau-Ponty's early and late work. See Madison, G., *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981.

[167]One of the major thematic concerns of *Phenomenology of Perception*, is an attempt to redress what Merleau-Ponty considers to be the philosophical tradition's inability to account for learning (PP 28).

[168]This alludes to the fallacy of metaphysical calls to 'the natural', when 'the natural' is taken to be synonymous with the original. Nature, were such a thing capable of existing, would be precisely that transience and flexibility which induces change, and which is inevitably opposed to the politically insidious suggestion that there is one original and unchanging way of being in the world that might be characterised as '*the* natural'.

habit for reducing one's sense of corporeity[170], Merleau-Ponty does so for diametrically opposed reasons. For him, the phenomenon of habituality reveals an intelligence to the body (PP 144), and his fundamental suggestion would seem to be that the body that learns and can be trained, is a body that bears thought and the mind within it, and hence defies the dualism.

The body-subject's capacity to acclimatise to its environment even enables it to physically change size, shape, colour, etc., in order to deal better with the conditions it confronts. Without considering the implications of this adapting 'physiology' at any length, it is worth briefly recognising that while the new movements involved in the first few times we swing a golf club, lift weights, etc., may initially prove to be difficult and will undoubtedly cause us some pain in the ensuing days afterwards, our body and muscles do gradually adjust. After a few months of regular gym activity, not only is the process of actually lifting the weights usually relatively easy (and always different from that initial voyage into the world of lactic acid!), but any pain the following day is also minimal and sometimes even non-existent. Perhaps this expertise of our bodies in accommodating us to the peculiarities of our environment also pertains to something not so strictly physiological, in that our decision-making processes also have this habitual component. To present the disparity between these two thinkers somewhat schematically, for Derrida the difference between preparing for a decision and actually deciding can never be effaced, but according to Merleau-Ponty's account, even the undecidability of decision-making can be gradually reabsorbed by the body so as to engender a minimum of fuss.

The suggestion being proposed is that the mode of being associated with a trained individual – and being trained is a state that the body-subject inevitably tends towards, for Merleau-Ponty – is such that it renders the undecidability involved in decision-making an increasingly rare state, or at least compels us to treat the aporia in an importantly different way. In order to justify this claim, it is worth considering Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus' empirical studies regarding the way the body learns. In an essay entitled "The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science", they explore this phenomenology of skill acquisition and agree that

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[169]Dillon, M., "Introduction" in *Écart and Différance*, p 11.
[170]Hegel, G., *Enzyklopadie der philosophiscen Wissenschaften*, Part III, *Werke In Zwanzig Banden*, Vol. 10, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970, p 186–9, as cited in Gasché, R., *Inventions of Difference*, p 172.

the fundamental concern of the body-subject is to attain this equilibrium in the world[171]. More importantly, however, their analysis also demarcates and considers the various states of our trained body, from beginner, to competent, to proficient, to master. What they make clear is that the master chess player, or expert car driver, through both talent and prolonged practice in an embodied context, becomes able to respond to situations without the intervention of thought, at least as it is traditionally conceived.

In one study, Dreyfus and Dreyfus establish that a master chess player can easily beat an exceptionally good chess player, even if they respond to their opponent's every move in less than five seconds and while they are also simultaneously counting or doing something else which preoccupies their cognitive capacity[172]. The degree to which the master player's ability is lessened is scarcely discernible, suggesting that their various moves are predominantly habitual reactions to certain configurations on the chess board, with conscious reflection and detailed cognitive preparations not necessarily a major aspect of what is involved in deciding, even in those types of activities which seem to require the most extensive and sustained 'thinking'. In Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary, the master chess player accords a priority to the "I can" rather than the "I think" (PP 137), and they need not rigorously attempt to ascertain the consequences of what a certain move might be, or be absorbed by thoughts like "should I place my knight here or there, use my knight or my bishop for this particular move?". While this type of thought is undoubtedly sometimes also involved, according to Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus it is a far more common experience for the beginner, and even more so for the competent, who are both confounded by the enormity of possibilities[173].

It would seem that both the beginner and the competent chess player experience something like an existential awareness of Derridean undecidability. They are tacitly aware that the rules they have been taught regarding chess are too numerous and necessarily ambiguous to help them decide on a move, and yet they try to restrict their decisions to these guidelines and to the prescriptions of the latest guide for chess players. Derrida is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that this type of preparation is never enough to ensure that one particular decision must eventuate, and that a decision must hence always move beyond any calculative reasoning that precedes it (GD 77). However,

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[171]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., "The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science", p 103–4.
[172]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 109–10.
[173]Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 105–8.

in Dreyfus' example, the continuing high standard of play that is attained to by the master chess player, despite the fact that they can no longer prepare for the numerous decisions that they will make, suggests that there are situations where the distinction between preparing for a decision and actually deciding might not be applicable. The body inclines us towards an expertise of those environments in which we consistently partake, and if this habitual comportment towards the world is suitably refined it seems to be capable of effacing (or at least altering) the aporetic difference between that which prepares for a decision and the instantiation of the decision itself. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that:

> It is the body which 'understands' in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense datum under an idea, and if the body is an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of 'understand' and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in the world (PP 144).

If the phenomenon of habit is to truly revise our notion of understanding and our notion of the body, as Merleau-Ponty argues it should, to a large extent that revision would involve acknowledging that habit is a flexible skill, a power of action and reaction[174] that cannot be considered to be irrelevant to decision-making, which is never accomplished by some ephemeral mind, but always in an embodied situation. Even if one wants to avoid Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that habituality can allow of a harmony between intention and performance in decision-making, the expert would seem to be closer to attaining this harmony than the beginner. While Derrida would undoubtedly love to problematise this distinction between expertise and its lack, the claim being proposed is that the aporia on which undecidability relies is alleviated by an increased inherence in our embodied context – ie. by mastering a technique. Sooner rather than later, the vast array of possibilities (in chess, as in life) becomes absorbed into our embodied motility, and even if our route is blocked, or a physical change forces us to re-evaluate (the tool is broken for Heidegger), adjustment is generally possible. According to Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus' studies regarding the way the body learns, it would also seem that for somebody well-trained in their particular area of expertise this adjustment becomes easier all the

time, and literally alters the breadth of the aporia between the preparation for a decision and the undecidable decision which must leap beyond this calculation. Can an aporia constrict? For the moment, it can only be repeated that it does appear that what is involved in the decision-making processes of the highly skilled, as compared to the beginner, is importantly different.

It is also not simply endeavours like chess that involve this difference between the ways in which an expert of a particular activity might decide, as compared to the efforts of somebody who is not quite so skilful. This gradual refinement of our capacity to make choices applies to all skilful coping with our environment, including the lecturer who has plied their particular trade for years. Even if the previous year's material is not literally regurgitated, the full spectrum of possible contingencies is approached in an importantly different way by an individual with an increased association in the language-game of being an academic. While this example may seem to have somewhat negative connotations, suggesting that habituality is a stagnation, this is not necessarily the case. Soon our lives form patterns, but this does not have to be in a way that ossifies or precludes adaptability. Indeed, it seems coherent to argue that as the lecturer increases in skill, the need to intellectually and consciously reflect upon what might be the best way to teach a particular course, or the most productive way to advise a particular PhD student on how to proceed, is inversely lessened. On mastering a technique, an individual can become accustomed to a situation in such a way that they 'understand' how best to decide, and without the need for this understanding to be accompanied by any prior mental representation, or consciously determined goal

Moreover, these type of phenomena, which blur the boundaries between action and decision-making, also trouble the logic of Derridean undecidability which depends upon a difference, albeit an unthematisable one, between what precedes a decision and the decision itself. As an individual gets better at a particular endeavour, and as their corporeal comportment towards the world becomes more sophisticated, these embodied "solicitations to act"[175] become more and more extensive, and also seem to play an increasingly important role in skilled decision-making (cf. PP 440). For example, both

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[174]Crossley, N., *The Politics of Subjectivity*, p 12.

[175]This is Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus' expression for the way in which people with expertise in a particular field of endeavour often find themselves solicited towards action in increasingly specific ways, and this embodied adjustment to their environment is something that the beginner simply does not have access to. See Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S., p 104.

the expert chess player and the lecturer have become acquainted with their situation in such a way that their decisions can be made without any obvious preparations and yet these often remain best described as skilful and intelligent decisions. What does it mean for the notion of undecidability if a trained body develops these increasingly specific solicitations to act, which have the capacity to reduce the difference between a decision and what precedes that decision? It would seem that the structure of undecidability is slightly altered, and while something like what Derrida characterises as undecidability is certainly sometimes involved, it may be more akin to a beheading than a "trial" if we are to take Derrida's criminal justice system motif seriously (LI 210). In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, our embodied context inclines us to leap through the aporia of undecidability immediately, and equally significantly, this decision, in its very instantiation, also refines our capacity to so decide given future occurrences of a similar environment.

At least on the most obvious level, Derrida might not deny this. Deconstruction is "not merely an invitation to wild and private lucubrations"[176] and it does not rule out the possibility of a certain marching order. Indeed, iterability refers to this very repetition and is a fundamental cornerstone of Derrida's philosophy. However, for Derrida, iterability is premised upon alterity and he has famously illustrated that every sign is necessarily altered in being used. According to him, it is difference that allows for the possibility of repetition, and it can hence be speculated that Derrida would seek to deconstruct this idea of habitual decision-making by revealing that the repetition of a certain way of deciding is only possible if there is something to distinguish it from that past decision that it seeks to repeat. Moreover, Derrida would also argue that we can never repeat a mode of behaviour self-identically, because the environment in which we are seeking to enact it in (either linguistically or existentially) is always different. Perhaps Derrida's discussion of undecidability could be used to deconstruct the idea that the body seeks its own equilibrium, and to suggest that talk of an embodied equilibrium is merely an essentialist remnant of the metaphysics of presence. In regard to this possible deconstruction of Merleau-Ponty, it seems to me, for the reasons that have been addressed earlier in this chapter (habituality requires an internal divergence between anticipative and precipitive elements), that his conception of an embodied habituality does not succumb to the metaphysics of presence in any obvious way. For the moment, however, let us restrict our

analysis to Derrida on the issue of habituality, and to one intriguing paragraph from *Of Grammatology*. In it, he argues that:

> Auto-affection, – subjectivity – gains in power and its mastery of the other to the extent that its power of repetition idealises itself. Here idealisation is the movement by which sensory exteriority, that which affects me or serves me as a signifier, submits itself to *my power of repetition*, to what thenceforward *appears* to me as my spontaneity and escapes me less and less (*my italics*, OG 165–66).

Auto-affection is hence seen as inducing what *appears* to us as spontaneous and habitual responses to a situation, and Derrida implies that rather than there being any pure spontaneity before the simulacrum is introduced (or the masturbatory experience for Rousseau), spontaneity is essentially an illusion. After all, as Derrida has suggested in *Of Grammatology*, auto-affection "constitutes the same (auto) as it divides the same" (OG 166), so that as soon as one presumes that the object or the signifier is escaping them less and less – for example, mastering the decision-making involved in a game of chess – it is, with equal insistence, also always moving away. Habit then, and the breaking down of the difference between the preparation for the decision and the decision itself, would be seen as engendering a difference precisely at the same time as it purported to be rid of it. However, it is worth pointing out that habit, at least for Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus, is not only about the world submitting to our "idealisations" and "powers of repetition", as Derrida characterises spontaneity in the above paragraph. Rather than being auto-affective and an idealistic projection of one's self upon these externalities, habituality would also seem to be the reverse – a strange type of complicity with the "outside" being internalised.

This is difficult territory, but it should be acknowledged that there is little doubt that Derrida is partly correct in suggesting that alterity must always be betrothed to any habitual understanding. If it were not, the whole project of attempting to understand another would be a meaningless one. This also applies to our habitual interactions with the objects of our world, since they too have their particular significance largely on account of our relations with the other and the society that we inhabit. The experience of undecidability is hence an important component of our humanity. We need to be confronted by the enormity of possible scenarios, and by the impossibility of laying claim to any mode of conduct having its own irrefutable logic. However, by ignoring some

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[176]Gasché, R., *Inventions of Difference*, p 123.

important aspects of what seems to be involved in decision-making, Derrida ensures that the 'presence' of this undecidability is rather overwhelming, and it is my contention that the paradoxes of undecidability should be characterised in a slightly different manner from how he usually describes them. More specifically, his descriptions of undecidability should acknowledge some form of interdependence with the way that our bodies tend towards an equilibrium with their environment (through skilful habit), and also towards recuperating the aporetic difference between a decision and what prepares for that decision. Derrida would certainly object to such a suggestion, but as well as having the advantage of being able to accommodate the important differences that exist between the decision-making processes of an expert and those not so fortunate, such a recognition also promises to avoid the alleged inability of deconstruction to thematise the political.

The claim is sometimes made that deconstruction's unrelenting emphasis upon undecidability ensures that a discussion of the decision itself (and hence politics) is rendered impossible[177]. Without being able to digress unduly in this regard, these claims have *some* credibility. Deconstruction is not apolitical, and it cannot but intervene in contexts as Derrida has suggested (PO 93), but if we are to take his emphasis upon the undecidability of decision-making seriously, it almost becomes a transcendental condition for the possibility of decision-making, rather than a discussion of how various decisions can and do take place. An understanding of the importance of our embodied and habitual comportment towards the world would provide the tools for moving beyond a mere recognition of such an aporia, and towards acknowledging that because learning takes place through our bodies, it can affect the very constitution of the decision-making aporia (that is, how large the gap between preparing for a decision and actually deciding might be). Our capacity to thereby make decisions can also be equally constrained or enhanced depending upon the political situation in which one exists, and how it facilitates this embodied acquisition of skills, and hence alters our apprehension (whether that be tacit or otherwise) of the decision-making aporia[178].

It seems clear that the overall emphasis accorded to this experience of

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[177]Critchley, S., p 199–200, 236. For an interpretation that disagrees with Critchley's account and argues for the political relevance of Derrida's use of undecidability, see Patrick, M., *Derrida, Responsibility and Politics*, p 140–8.

[178]In this respect, Merleau-Ponty is not diametrically opposed to the work of Foucault, who also discusses how the body learns and retains the various meanings of the culture in which it partakes. For an understanding of some of the similarities between these theorists, see Crossley, N., *The Politics of Subjectivity*.

undecidability is in a considerable opposition, and that there is a significant disagreement between these two philosophers regarding human experience. Is Merleau-Ponty advocating a philosophy of the visceral, whereas Derrida's position inclines towards a philosophy of the cerebral? Derrida's various discussions of undecidability are completely against some rationalistic, decision-making paradigm that emphasises the accumulation of knowledge (block upon block). That said, and without entertaining the semiological reductionist interpretation, Derrida's characterisations of the decision do allow only minimal recourse to the way in which both understanding and deciding inevitably have an embodied context. Postulating that there will always be a leap beyond our bodies in deciding, Derrida never considers the possibility that our embodied predisposition towards acquiring skills can cause the aporia that he discerns – between the preparation for a decision and its instantiation – to at least partly coalesce. Not least for reasons of political efficacy[179], it seems to me that deconstruction should be careful to consider the body, that most familiar and yet problematically discussed terrain of all.

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[179]Moreover, chapter ten will argue that Derrida's reticence to consider the embodied significance of decision-making also ensures that his later philosophy harbours a nostalgia for something tantamount to a self-other dualism. In opposition to this, Merleau-Ponty's detailed account of this embodied habituality endows the other with more than merely a messianic promise, and helps us to understand the complicated ways in which the other that eludes us, is nevertheless already there, intertwined in our shared experience of the world.

PART 2: THE OTHER

7. Solipsism and the Master-Slave Dialectic: An Onto-Ethical Dissonance Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

Somewhat notoriously, the phenomenological tradition has been accused of being unable to deal with the problem of the other. This will be partially demonstrated in this chapter's consideration of Sartre's prolonged struggles with the issue, but for the moment it suffices to present the general problem. Phenomenology speaks of horizons and immanence, and consistently suggests that the perceived object cannot be foreign to those who perceive. On account of this, there is also a related tendency to assimilate objects to the terms of reference of the perceiver, and the phenomenological treatment of the other hence inclines, at least potentially, towards solipsistic positions and the denial of the alterity or the transcendence of the other. At the very least, the question of the other seems to be a difficult one for phenomenology.

For Husserl, the question was posed thus: "How can my ego, within his peculiar ownness, constitute under the name 'experience of something other', precisely something other?"[180].

Merleau-Ponty recognises the problem in a similar fashion: "The spectacle begins to furnish itself a spectator who is not I, but who is reproduced from me. How is it possible? How can I see something that begins to see?" (PW 135).

Unsurprisingly, however, Merleau-Ponty envisages his notion of the body-subject, as it is expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as contributing towards the dissolution of this problem. As has been previously suggested, he argues that the experience of the body is opposed to the intellectual reflection that disengages the object from the subject, thus giving us merely the thought of the body, or the body in idea, rather than in its experiential reality. This conception of the body-subject also has some significant consequences for the problem of the other, the apparent insolubility of which has long been an outrage for our rationalist tradition. Indeed, it will be argued that not only does Merleau-Ponty's dissolution of the mind/body problem avoid the solipsistic tendencies that have befallen much of the Western philosophical tradition (and arguably phenomenology in particular), but it also provides the foundation for a conception of

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[180]Husserl, E., *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, p 94.

other people that refutes the ontology involved in the master-slave dialectic, and more particularly, in Sartre's famous adaptation of it.

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon our pre-reflective and embodied subjectivity becomes significant because of the embodied intersubjectivity that it entails. For him, "transcendental subjectivity is a revealed subjectivity, revealed to itself and to others, and is for that reason an intersubjectivity" (PP 361). This should not surprise us unduly, since he maintains, along with Sartre, that ontology can never be divorced from ethical considerations. While this ethical aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought is not always immediately obvious (indeed, he is sometimes accused of lacking it), this chapter, as well as the following one, will help to clarify his enduring ethical relevance. To present this correlation between the ontological and the ethical schematically, Merleau-Ponty's fundamental suggestion that "I am my body" means that just as I must be the exterior that I present to others, so too must the body of the other be the other themselves in a meaningful sense (PP xii). While we have already seen that relationships with the other are phenomenologically given because intersubjectivity is involved in, and presupposed by our every perception, Merleau-Ponty makes the further point that precisely because I can see and be seen by the other, "this instrument of expression which is called physiognomy can be bearer of existence" (PP 404). The identification of subjectivity with our embodied engagement in the world allows us to find the other in their visible behaviour.

These simple suggestions may, at first sight, seem more reductive than clarificatory in explaining the nuances of human behaviour, but Merleau-Ponty manages to make such a position eminently persuasive. If we are spontaneously at one with the movements of our bodies, then so too is the other. According to one of Merleau-Ponty's examples, my friend's consent or refusal of a request for them to move nearer is immediately understood through bodily interaction. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty goes on to suggest, this does not involve a perception, followed by an interpretation, and then a behavioural response. Rather:

> Both form a system which varies as a whole. If, for example, realising that I am not going to be obeyed, I vary my gesture, we have here, not two acts of consciousness. What happens is that I see my partner's unwillingness, and my gesture of impatience emerges from this situation without any intervening thought (PP 111).

Just as I am my body, so too is the other his or her body, and there is no need for access to some abstract realm of private, mental intention. In his "Preface" to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes explicit that "there is nothing hidden behind these faces and gestures, no domain to which I have no access, merely a little shadow which owes its very existence to the light" (PP xii). There are several important consequences of this suggestion that bodies are primordially expressive, including the fact that while it makes the existence of the other self-evident, it also means that a certain gesture does not make me think of anger, or read anger behind the expression, but that it is anger in-itself (PP 184). Rather than hide the 'mind', the body must be able to entirely disclose it, or more exactly be it. Without considering Merleau-Ponty's more general claim that it often makes little sense to distinguish between mind and body, there can be little doubt that the majority of associations with others carry with them the kind of spontaneous trust and immediate receptivity to the other of which he speaks. When we hear a scream of pain, generally we do not take the time to infer that this is probably indicative of some inner mental pain, nor are we likely to doubt the rationale behind such a scream. We take the scream as a direct and primary expression of pain.

Moreover, when a close friend is suffering we tend to empathise immediately, to the degree that we almost are their pain. When a baby opens its mouth on having its finger bitten, it directly acknowledges the intention of the other and it is in this phenomenological sense that the existence of the other is proven. For the baby, however, actions have more than merely an intersubjective significance (PP 352), or to be more precise, according to Merleau-Ponty, a baby is essentially at one with not just the mother, but the entire external world. Or equally aptly, there is no external world before what he, following Lacan, terms the mirror-stage. As we shall see, this is a very different position to the account of the other provided by Sartre, in that for Merleau-Ponty, the boundaries between self and other are not considered primordial, but rather induced by language and experience[181].

Of course, it is worth briefly recognising that for an adult (or even a post mirror-stage infant) a passion is not for the one who directly experiences it, equivalent with the

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[181]The considerable attention that Merleau-Ponty pays to psychology (he was Chair of Child Psychology at Sorbonne in 1947) alludes to his and Sartre's vastly different treatments of the other. While Sartre was to coin existential psychoanalysis, he did not, like Merleau-Ponty, pay much attention to the findings of psychology in the general framing of his dialectic. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty consistently refers to psychological studies in order to elucidate his own points (Gestalt in particular), and not only those of empirical significance, but also those of ontological import.

experience of those who perceive it from a distance. The pleasure of the voyeur is significantly different from the pleasure of the participant, even if there is a sense in which all parties, the voyeur included, are participating. Merleau-Ponty is not attempting to conflate the entire self-other distinction here. Communication is never entirely complete and we never fuse with the other, or entirely efface them in his phenomenology. Just because we see the other immediately on the surface does not entail that we are them. In pre-reflective existence, while the ego and the other are mutually related, the distinction and transcendence of the two is nevertheless also preserved.

However, in relation to his suggestion that relations with the other are predominantly conducted without some type of interpretive gap, Merleau-Ponty has another important point to make. According to him, this immediate apprehension of the other is confirmed when we discover within ourselves what he describes as "a kind of internal weakness standing in the way of my being totally individualised: a weakness which exposes me to the gaze of others as a man among men" (PP xii). His use of the word "weakness" here is somewhat misleading. It is the awareness of this internal lack (that we are never sufficient to ourselves) that allows us to avoid the avarices of what he terms "objective thought" (ie. scientific thought), which seems to have no place for other people. Indeed, in *The Primacy of Perception*, he appreciates that "the recognition, at the very heart of our most individual experience, of a fruitful contradiction which submits this individual experience to the consideration of others – is the remedy to both scepticism and pessimism" (PrP 134). The ambiguity and contradiction that typify Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of subjectivity are envisaged as that which allows the other to exist at all. While the other is presupposed by, and encroaches upon our every project and perception in the world, there is an important implication here that the other comes into being and is made possible by the fact that an individual subject cannot be present, or sufficient to themselves. Rather than the other being domesticated by the horizonal projections of the subject, as traditional phenomenology might have it, it is the fundamental alterity of the other that makes presence-to-self impossible.

Now, there seems to be an increasing consensus in regard to the impossibility of an unequivocal self-presence in contemporary European philosophy. We have already considered the Derridean denunciation of the Husserlian 'now' moment (see chapters three and five) and Sartre's philosophy also admits an essential contradiction. In many ways Sartre's ontology is actually premised upon a contradiction: the for-itself which

creates meaning (and would seem to imply a presence-to-self) is nevertheless not what it is and is what it is not[182]. This internal contradiction is due in no small part to the other, just as it also is for Merleau-Ponty. More specifically, this is because for Sartre, the other can accomplish something which the for-itself alone cannot: they can see us as we are. It is because the other holds the key to an apprehension of our existence that they are so important to us, although this chapter will eventually question the tacit Sartrean presumption that it is only an affirmation of ourselves that is sought in dealing with the other.

Before we become involved in such details, however, it is worth making one simple but often overlooked point in favour of Merleau-Ponty's paradoxical ontology. As we shall see, for Merleau-Ponty, it is the ontology of the body-subject – which he describes as a "fruitful contradiction" of transcendence in immanence (PrP 18) – that makes the recognition of the other, as well as communication with the other, possible at all. As Nick Crossley suggests, if we were either a transcending mind (a self that is sufficient for-itself) or entirely empirically immanent, the demand for communication would be non-existent[183]. The other would appear to have no hold upon us whatsoever, or they might be something that only impedes our access to the world. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, this paradigm involves the other either "receding into absence, or insofar as he remains present to me, is felt as a threat" (PP 355).

We will examine the other conceived of as a threat throughout this chapter, but for the moment it is important to recognise the possibility of a philosophy rendering the other absent. While it is undoubtedly a counter-intuitive position, it is certainly far from an unheard of position in the history of philosophy. After all, from a certain rationalist paradigm that reduces subjectivity to the mind, it seems that there is consciousness and diametrically opposed to this there are the objects of the world, the body included. This means that if I constitute the world, then the Other presumably constitutes the world also[184]. However, this possibility is inconceivable because I see the Other external to me and within the realm of objects. I cannot directly access his or her consciousness, so the existence of the Other, in this type of thought, remains unconfirmable and subject only to

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[182]Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness*, p 268 (hereafter referred to in this chapter as BN).
[183]Crossley, N., *The Politics of Subjectivity*, chapter two.
[184]I use capitals for the Other here, and at other relevant times, not just because it is Sartrean protocol, but also because it reflects a distinct way of conceiving of the problem: ie. as a problem to be solved by the reflecting, rational mind.

the problematic speculation of arguments by analogy which presuppose what they are called upon to explain (PP 352). Solipsism is inordinately difficult to refute from within a rationalist/idealist framework that conceives of the mind as capable of, and indeed requiring the transcending of the body.

However, even if one manages to avoid the "reef of solipsism", this equation of subjectivity with purely 'mental' attributes often encourages another equally problematic manifestation. Typified best by Hegel's master-slave dialectic, and made famous via Sartre's contestable interpretation of it in *Being and Nothingness*, it is a portrait of human relationships that remains entangled in a subject-object dialectic not unlike that which encourages solipsism. Now, while Sartre's ambitious attempt to synthesise Hegelian and Cartesian positions sought to break away from the failures of phenomenology to adequately treat the problem of the Other, according to Merleau-Ponty, his efforts were ultimately betrayed by a flawed ontology. In tracing the divergences between these two compatriots, Merleau-Ponty's account of the other not only becomes significantly clearer, but he raises some objections to Sartre's position that it will be argued are also applicable to the philosophy of Derrida.

In this respect, the obvious meta-discursive question is why would this thesis' intention to examine Derrida in terms of responsibility to alterity be best accomplished via a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre, particularly given that such a connection has rarely, if ever, been pursued? There are several reasons for this apparent digression, but the most important of these is that a significant question for forthcoming chapters will be to what extent Derrida's philosophy of alterity might also be referred to as "agnostic" and as being symptomatic of a "disguised solipsism", as Merleau-Ponty accuses Sartre's position of. While there are many differences between Sartre's and Derrida's respective accounts of alterity, it will eventually be argued that both theorists can be envisaged as denying the importance of the ways in which self and other are intertwined together – at least, chapters nine and ten will argue that this applies to Derrida's later philosophy more so than to his earlier work.

Moreover, what is significant about Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Sartre's account of alterity, is that he explicitly argues that Sartre's mistakes are intimately tied to his ontology, and to a dualistic split between mind and body. While Derrida will not be accused of partaking in a simple dualism (deconstruction is predicated upon revealing dualisms as always already breached), it has been established that Derrida is reluctant to

talk about embodiment and it will be argued that this has some important consequences for his conception of responsibility towards alterity. Deferring any further contemplation of the politics of these suggestions until a later stage, it is towards a brief exegesis of Sartre's position that this chapter must turn.

For Sartre, because it is only the Other who can grasp that aspect of me which on principle must continually escape me, "being-seen constitutes me as a defenceless being for a freedom which is not my freedom" (BN 267). As they can "accomplish for us a function of which we are incapable: to see us as we are", the Other therefore has the potential, in Sartre's terminology, to transcend one's transcendence. As a consequence, this necessitates that an individual has their foundation outside of themselves. When an individual is looked at by another transcendent consciousness, Sartre claims that a metaphorical drain-hole effect ensues and around the Other's perspective flow all of the objects that were once of my world. This is most famously demonstrated in his example of the person caught peering through the key-hole, and Sartre argues that the Look of the Other instigates not only a transformation of oneself, but also a complete and total metamorphosis of the world. The Look dénies physical distances from objects and unfolds its own distances, and even through the self-deception involved in what Sartre terms Bad Faith, one still cannot avoid this dramatic and uneasy recognition of the Other's freedom.

However, Sartre's notion of Being-for-others has more serious consequences for human interaction than merely emphasising our own innate vulnerability. Seeing the other automatically involves the realisation that I too can be seen and hence rendered an object by their free subjectivity (after all, one cannot be made an object by an object). The for-itself (or subjectivity) – which according to Sartre, "is what it is not and is not what it is" (BN 268) – seeks naturally to be the foundation of itself by reducing the impact of the other's look. However, this goal could only be attained if one could control their Being-for-others and since this dimension is obviously dependent upon others, it necessitates that any attempt to control it entails an attempt to control Others.

This problem is reinforced by the fact that Sartre's notion of the Look precludes two people simultaneously "looking" at each other. By "looking" Sartre does not mean eyes simply following one another, but the rendering of a subject as an object. This internal haemorrhage obviously requires a subject to induce it, who must be either imagined or real. Given his contention that one cannot perceive or imagine

simultaneously (BN 258), this means that Beings-in-the-world are necessarily separated into two general dichotomies; one is either the looker, or the looked upon[185]. According to Sartre, this represents the only possible structure of experiencing the Other, and depending on which mode the self has manifested itself in (ie. looking), the other must on principle be the opposite (ie. being looked at). As Sartre persuasively shows, any systematic elaboration from this position fundamentally entails conflict.

Because the experiences of the social self (shame, fear and alienation) are so disorientating, Sartre explains that people adopt variations on either sadism or masochism in an attempt to control them. Again, he leaves us with two main options. One can constantly objectify others and thereby seek to prevent the emergence of one's social self, or one can induce the Other to see one exactly as one wishes to be seen and thereby control their subjectivity. There is no possibility of mutual recognition between individuals in this picture of human relations. If one is inevitably a subject or an object, transcendent or immanent, then human relationships can only oscillate between these two polarities without ever approaching a complementary intersubjectivity. Moreover, Sartre also argues that the positions of master and slave are untenable, since they both divest the Other of their true relation to us, and yet both positions are also envisaged as inevitable. There is hence a weight of philosophical significance behind Sartre's dramatic declaration that "hell is other people"[186].

Now, Merleau-Ponty admits of a similar phenomenon to the drain-hole inducing exigencies of Sartre's Look. Speaking of the appearance of another in our immediate surroundings, he says "round about the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn and so to speak, sucked in: to this extent, it is no longer merely mine" (PP 353). Someone is appropriating my world and this description would seem to demand a philosophical position similar to Sartre's – the Other can transform me into an object, as I can transform the Other, by a process of continual looking.

However, Merleau-Ponty makes a pertinent point that does not make such a

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[185]According to Sartre, a similar dichotomy also applies to touch, as was highlighted in chapter four. Sartre suggests that "to touch and to be touched... these are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try and reconcile by the term 'double sensation'. In fact, they are radically distinct and exist on two incommunicable levels" (BN 304). This notion that the body as subject is ontologically disjunct from the body as object, reaffirms the dualistic thinking that ultimately precludes Sartre from theorising anything but the master-slave dialectic. While Merleau-Ponty agrees that these two experiences cannot be united by the term 'double sensation' (PP 93), he nevertheless insists upon their thoroughly communicative and interdependent relationship.

[186]Sartre, J.P., '*No Exit' and Three Other Plays*, trans. Abel, New York: n.d.

position and the correlative suggestion that "hell is other people" the necessary outcome of all human relations. He argues that the other's gaze can only induce this tumultuous ontological change from subject to object (or object to subject) if we withdraw into an abstract thinking disposition that he characterises as an "inhuman gaze" in which we merely observe. A related criticism will be levelled at Derrida in chapter nine[187], but for Merleau-Ponty, this objectification by the other's gaze may indeed be unbearable, but the situation persists only while the improbability of communication is conceded.

However, for Merleau-Ponty, "the body of others, insofar as it is a bearer of symbolic behaviour... breaks away from the condition of one of my phenomena, presents to me the task of true communication and bestows on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being" (PrP 125). The body of another person is hence not just an object that has the capacity to constrain my freedom, but an object (for want of a better word) that *compels* us to attempt what is admittedly the ongoing task of "true communication". By true, I take Merleau-Ponty to be referring to a form of meaningful communication that acknowledges both the other's alterity and their capacity to be understood, and it is important to note that the above quotation also emphasises how difficult it is to envisage a refusal to communicate. This will be explained more precisely in the following chapter, but for the moment, a simple example might illustrate the point. Imagine what a devastating trick a group of students could play on a new teacher by simply uttering nothing at all, and giving away no meaning in their facial expressions. If the students could sustain this impassive blankness in the face of repeated questions, for the teacher nothing but madness could ensue. But the point is that, in fact, this is not a possible scenario – the demand of the other will always exact some form of a response; solitude and communication are not two alternatives, but two moments of a unique phenomenon demanded by the existence of the other (PP 359).

Even if relations with the other are often conflictual in the manner that Sartre suggests (and who could deny that?), for Merleau-Ponty, the situation can be redeemed simply "by establishing relations with him, by bringing about his clear recognition of

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[187]To present my argument schematically, Derrida will be accused of cultivating something tantamount to this abstract thinking disposition. In chapter nine, it will be argued that Derrida's later philosophy verges on becoming an "agnosticism" in regard to the other, and William James has famously described agnosticism as a position of "pure intellectualism". Derrida's agnosticism in regard to the other is manifest on two different levels: he textually privileges a vacillation (ie. it cannot be decided whether Abraham is the most moral or the most immoral); and he also privileges something wholly other (*tout autre*) that cannot be imbued with any determinate characteristics, and whose coming might or might not ever actually

me" (PP 357). Embroiled in a Sartrean perspective, this recognition may seem difficult to attain, but as we have just seen, it is something that the very presence of another compels us to seek (if not in every other, at least in *an* other). Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, it is certainly not as difficult as Sartre suggests – "let him utter a word, or even make a gesture of impatience, and already he ceases to transcend me" (PP 361). His implication seems to be that by immersing ourselves in embodied action, the subject can at least minimise the anxiety and anguish of Sartrean human relations. Perhaps even the experience of joy can be accommodated in this conception of the acting body-subject. At the very least, it seems that individual existences are far more likely to be construed as transcending each other when we remain, in an important sense, disembodied.

Indeed, even if Sartre is analysing what appears, almost incontrovertibly, to be embodied aspects of existence (such as desire, sadism, masochism, etc.), according to Merleau-Ponty, this is ultimately not the case. The Sartrean analysis of embodiment construes the other as a being who cannot be reached, and interaction hence consists in limiting and controlling their effect on the for-itself. But the other's for-itself cannot be known, and there is no possibility of engaging with the other immediately and through their embodiment. Bodies can nullify each other's progress, but there is not really any embodied engagement with the other that merits the name. This shall become clearer as we progress, but the sense in which Sartrean subjectivity is actually embodied is, at the very least, subject to some doubt.

For Merleau-Ponty, when reintegrated into the primordial nature of everyday existence, the body cannot be conceived of as simply an objectified in-itself or a subjectivised for-itself[188]. Although it is in some sense an object for others and a lived reality for the subject, it is never simply an object or a subject. The body-subject must reside between such dualities, and for Merleau-Ponty, the physiological and the psychological interact almost seamlessly. As he makes explicit, this means that "if another's body is not an object for me, nor mine an object for him, if both are

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eventuate (the messianic).

[188]Given that consciousness is considered to be irremediably embodied, and hence not a pure for-itself, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy manages to avoid the problems that many philosophers have had with Sartre's notion of an absolute freedom in regard to a given situation. Oppression, or at least a freedom devoid of projects, is possible within Merleau-Ponty's framework, while such a position cannot so easily be accommodated within Sartre's philosophy. Perhaps this is why many feminist theorists – including Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Sonia Kruks, Rosalyn Diprose, Cathryn Vasseleu, Vicki Kirby, Dorothea Olkowski, and even De Beauvoir – have had quite a lot of time for Merleau-Ponty's work, notwithstanding the criticisms that many of them have made in relation to his presuppositions regarding 'normal' sexuality.

manifestations of behaviour, the positing of the Other does not reduce me to the status of an object" (PP 352). Despite the slightly crude simplicity of this suggestion (these ideas are expanded upon in *The Visible and the Invisible*), this acknowledgment of the possibility of reciprocal recognition between individuals seems almost self-evidently to be an improvement on Sartre's position.

Of course, Merleau-Ponty is not suggesting that Sartrean conflict is an impossible mode of human interaction, even outside of the difficulties inherent in objective thought (PP 356). There is a lived experience of solipsism which is insurmountable (PP 357–8) and conflict with the other does not dissipate entirely in the irreflexive. Relationships with the other can sometimes calcify into competing entities and reading another's face can be problematic. But by paying attention to the aspects of our embodied situation that Merleau-Ponty delineates, and not falsely imposing subject-object relations ubiquitously, these type of phenomena are certainly lessened and take on a less damaging form. Moreover, his analysis serves to deny Sartre's conclusion that such relationships are phenomenologically primitive. The other can look at me, penetrate me to the very fibre of my being, "only because we belong to the same system of being-for-itself and being-for-another; we are moments of the same syntax, we count in the same world, we belong to the same being" (VI 83). In other words, for him, the conflict of Sartre's Being-for-others is dependent upon the more fundamental experience of communication, or the fact that in Merleau-Ponty's words, "we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity" (PP 354).

Whereas Sartre asserts that the alienating experience of Being-for-others (induced by being victim to the Look of the Other) precedes and founds our experience of Being-with-others – that is, any possibility of a collective 'we', or *mitsein* (BN 413) – Merleau-Ponty disagrees on precisely this point: Being-with-others, not Being-for-others, is the more primordial mode of being.

This chapter has spent some time exploring this divergence between these two philosophers, and Merleau-Ponty's position seems the more compelling for many reasons, not least his ability to entertain two fundamental notions that Sartre cannot: love and oppression, both of which are rather important factors of any relationship with a human other. But do we also want to take on board Merleau-Ponty's insistence that the other and I are of the same syntax, belong to the same being, and are ultimately interdependent with each other and the world? Do we want to accept his suggestion that

"the world and I are within one another"? (VI 123). Such ontological questions will be pursued in detail in the following chapter, but for the moment some questions of a more empirical kind also plague Merleau-Ponty's account of relations with others.

Most obviously, the act of lying seems to be difficult to thematise from within such a framework, as issues regarding how one might differentiate between a body-subject with genuine goodwill, love, hatred, etc., and one feigning these emotions come to the fore. If we are our body in the sense that Merleau-Ponty intends, then it seems that the lie must be necessarily embedded in an aspect of the false gesture that differs slightly from the genuine version. One may feel inclined to doubt whether expressions are necessarily always a pure reflection of our attitudes and dispositions as Merleau-Ponty seems to believe. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty could and would undoubtedly insist, as Wittgenstein also has, that within the meaning conferred upon our world by mores and convention, lying cannot predominate or else communication would cease[189]. While Derrida would probably contest this claim (cf. LI), it seems to me that in regard to his dependence upon the pre-reflective purity of expression (which is importantly distinct from advocating a simple expressivism), Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy is not defending a position that is beyond redemption.

However, even if one does not want to concede that our relationships with the other are as unmanipulative as Merleau-Ponty inadvertently implies, in every one of our experiences, presumably, there are occasions which attest to the possibility of interaction beyond the subject-object dichotomy and its perennial role-playing. If so, this is a position that Sartre must struggle to accommodate and this is largely because of his dichotomistic conception of existence. Indeed, Sartre's conflictual portrait of human relationships issues forth from his own notion of embodiment (and ontology), which despite his protestations to the contrary, remains dualistic.

While there has been an immense amount of literature on this subject[190], this chapter cannot become too deeply immersed in this debate. Such a digression would obscure the major purpose of this thesis, which is to use Merleau-Ponty's work to place some critical pressure upon Derrida's conception of alterity. However, I think that it is relatively clear that Sartre's ontology does require reflective consciousness (or Being-for-itself) to assert a priority over the things of the world, which are Being-in-itself and

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[189]Wittgenstein, L., *Zettel*, eds. Anscombe & Von Wright, trans. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, section 571.

which it can transcend. Granting primacy to consciousness and hence betraying his Cartesian heritage, Sartre seems to think that the activities of the body can be understood by disassociating oneself from them and reflecting upon them. It is for this reason, according to Merleau-Ponty at least, that Sartre is unable to truly grasp the lived experience of the body.

Even though Sartre wants to repudiate the thesis that mind and body are distinct substances[191], and does so at length in the later stages of *Being and Nothingness* (cf. BN 400–445), Sartrean relations with the other are typified not by a negotiation between body-subjects, but between minds seeking to control that freedom which possesses the capacity to judge. From such a standpoint, it is somewhat inevitable that Sartre would also end up treating the body as a Being-in-itself, rather than as something that is necessarily at the juncture of these polarities. For him, "the Other's body is... the tool which I am not and which I utilise (or which resists me which amounts to the same thing)" (BN 445–7). It seems that Sartre's flawed ontology seduces us into an ethical blind alley. Without the hinge or mediating function of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon the body-subject, the problem of other people was inevitably going to be a substantial one for Sartre, and it seems that having so deliberately attempted to avoid solipsism, he veered towards what philosophically speaking he must have considered the lesser evil: the master-slave dialectic.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty provides a more detailed analysis of Sartre's dualistic ontology and again devotes particular attention to Sartre's treatment of the other. According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's philosophy is a version of what he terms "high-altitude thinking" (VI 69), since the concepts he employs (Being and Nothingness) are not primordial, but are established via dialectical argument, which come after our primary inherence in Being (VI 76). The pertinent question, as Bernard Flynn points out, is hence whether "it is possible to think the appearance of the world, the apparition of being, in terms of the concepts of being and nothingness – in terms of a negation which decomposes the identity of being and opens a space in which being comes to appearance"[192]. In regard to this question, Merleau-Ponty answers with a

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[190]Warnock, M., *The Philosophy of Sartre*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1965.
[191]Priest, S., *Merleau-Ponty*, p 54.
[192]Flynn, B., "The Question of Ontology: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty" in *The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gillian, Urbana: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, p 117.

resounding 'no'. By basing his entire ontology on the concepts pure being and pure nothingness, which for Merleau-Ponty come after all possible experience (VI 89), Sartre does not describe, but constructs an openness of being. Phenomenology, we must remember, is supposed to be about description (PP xi), and yet all of Sartre's analyses are guided by this rather abstract distinction between Being and Nothingness, the for-itself and the in-itself, regardless of how concrete the situation being analysed may actually appear (eg. smoking cigarettes).

To Sartre's philosophy of negativity (the for-itself that is *nothingness* is responsible for meaning, and we are hence *not* just our past, *nor* our circumstances, etc.), Merleau-Ponty opposes a philosophy of inherence. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, this idea is contained in all of the ramifications of the body-subject, but in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he clarifies the ontology of this inherence – being is possible only through reversibility and the intertwining. Both of these related notions will be examined in detail in the following chapter, but for the moment it suffices to point out Merleau-Ponty's claim that:

> Because my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched, because, therefore in this sense they see and touch the visible, the tangible, from within, because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things which nevertheless it is surrounded, the world and I are within one another, and there is no anteriority of the *percipere* to the *percipi*, there is simultaneity or even retardation (VI 123).

In other words, and Flynn puts the point well, Being does not reveal itself across an interval of nothingness, but from a profound intimacy of the body and the world[193]. However, it is not an intimacy in the sense of a fusion, but rather a chiasmic overlapping. This ontology ensures that, for Merleau-Ponty, aspects of the perceived world are not either present or absent, but rather "they are present in levels and gradations and their absence trails off gradually from the field of presence"[194]. Perception is fundamentally ambiguous in a way that Sartre's philosophy cannot seem to accommodate (although his literature, and *Nausea* in particular, seems able to). For Merleau-Ponty, it is Sartre's emphasis on defining the mind as the pure negative which creates meaning that renders impossible the openness upon being which is the perceptual faith (VI 88).

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[193]Flynn, B., "The Question of Ontology: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty", p 122.
[194]Flynn, B., "The Question of Ontology: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty", p 121.

Now, this manner in which Sartre annuls our inherence in being, for Merleau-Ponty, also has analogous consequences for our relations with the other. This has already been partially illustrated in this chapter's descriptions of Sartre's master-slave dialectic, but his philosophy also has some other undesirable consequences. Most important among these is the suggestion that I cannot discover another person, or ascertain some 'truth' (in a loose sense) about them, but only realise a "dimension of myself that comes to be fixed through the other's look"[195]. As Flynn points out, this implies that the other's presence adds nothing and only freezes me into what I have made of myself[196]. Michele Le Doeuff has also argued that this amounts to a "defacto solipsism"[197], and the following remark of Merleau-Ponty's sums up his similarly inclined interpretation of the ethical consequences of Sartre's position. He says, "power over me is exactly measured by the consent which I have given to my body, to my situation; he has alienating force only because I alienate myself. Philosophically speaking, there is no experience of the other" (VI 71). Sartrean philosophy hence ignores what, for Merleau-Ponty, is an essential fact of our inherence in being – that we are always involved in a human world with other people, and if we confront the other, this background is nevertheless already there.

Again, these are significantly different conceptions of the other that are being employed. In many ways, the concept of sharing is foreign to the Sartrean description of the other. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, the other is fundamentally those that we do share a world with. Politically speaking, Merleau-Ponty's account would seem to have more to offer us, at least in regard to the innumerable institutions that we undoubtedly do share. Nick Crossley's book, *The Politics of Subjectivity*, highlights Merleau-Ponty's applicability to such issues[198], as does Kerry Whiteside's work, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*[199]. It is also worth recalling that it was a political quarrel with Sartre that precipitated his and Merleau-Ponty's acrimonious parting of the ways, with Sartrean Marxism appearing lacking in some important respects[200]. Such

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[195]Flynn, B., "The Question of Ontology: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty", p 124.
[196]Flynn, B., "The Question of Ontology: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty", p 124.
[197]Le Doeuff, M., *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy etc*, trans. Selous, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p 62–3.
[198]Crossley, N., *The Politics of Subjectivity*, p 1–7, 136–69.
[199]Whiteside, K., *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
[200]For a more detailed account of their political differences, see Merleau-Ponty, M., *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Bien, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973. Also of interest in this respect, is the problems that Sartre had with Albert Camus after the publication of his politically motivated *The Rebel*, which in my opinion at least, is actually the most successful of Camus' book-length philosophical essays.

issues lie beyond the scope of this thesis, however, and it can certainly be argued that a philosophy intent on emphasising our differences, rather than what we share, can provide the foundation for effective political thought. Indeed, this is something that Derrida attempts to do[201].

Without digressing any further into such questions, it is worth emphasising that in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty reaffirms the subtle proximity between solipsism and the master-slave dialectic that this chapter has been trying to establish. In describing Sartrean relations with the other, he suggests that:

> If the other is really the other, that is, a for-itself in the strong sense that I am for myself, he must never be so before my eyes... it is necessary that there be no perception of an other... and that the other be my negation or my destruction. Every other interpretation, under the pretext of placing us, him and myself, in the same universe of thought, ruins the alterity of the other and hence marks the triumph of an undisguised solipsism. Conversely, it is in making the other not only inaccessible but invisible for me that I guarantee his alterity and quit solipsism (VI 79).

If the moral equivalent to solipsism, which Sartre was clearly trying to avoid (cf. BN 223–33), is a blindness to the other as other, then it is not surprising that he would approach the moral opposite to solipsism; that being the master-slave dialectic, and a rather absolute conception of an alterity that is "inaccessible" and "invisible". However, given the faceless and anonymous conception of alterity that is induced by this master-slave dialectic, these two extremes paradoxically result in some rather similar consequences.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to raise (and answer) the obvious question regarding whether the Sartrean "solution" really does justice to the alterity of the other – he suggests that "this agnosticism in regard to the other's being for himself, which appeared to guarantee his alterity, suddenly appears as the worst of infringements upon it" (VI 79). This is an important idea that will be returned to in the later stages of this thesis and in

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See Sartre, J, P., *Situations*, trans. Eisler, London: H. Hamilton, 1965, p 71–112.

[201]The political consequences of deconstruction are accorded more attention in chapters six, nine and ten. The political writings of Jean-Luc Nancy are also of relevance here, as while indebted to the Derridean analysis of difference, Nancy also emphasises sharing to a greater extent. See Nancy, J., *Inoperative Community*, ed. Connor, trans. Connor, Garbus, Holland & Sawhney, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

relation to Derrida's exaltation of the 'otherness of the other'[202]. It is hence worth pausing to explicate exactly what Merleau-Ponty means. Sartre is accused of an agnosticism in regard to the other because he ignores our inherence in being, and because he ignores the way in which alterity is always intertwined with subjectivity. Sartre posits a radical singularity, a void of nothingness that can have no content, and he argues that given this situation, the other should not be theorised except in relation to their effects on the self. In his own way then, Sartre very much wants to preserve the alterity of the other, despite what theorists like Lévinas have suggested[203]. But Merleau-Ponty insists that speaking only of oneself, just like speaking for everybody, also misses an aspect of our experience. In regard to this paradox – the proximity between no other (solipsism) and an absolute other (master-slave dialectic) – Merleau-Ponty makes an interesting and pertinent point. He argues that:

> A negativist thought is identical to a positivist thought, and in this reversal remains the same in that, whether considering the void of nothingness or the absolute fullness of being, it in every case ignores density, depth, the plurality of planes, the background worlds (VI 68).

In other words, when attempting to speak of nobody, in the end we do speak of everybody, and vice versa. Intending to preserve the other's alterity, Sartre cannot avoid effacing it, and his suggestion that the other cannot be accessed extends beyond France and into many different languages, and has, or so Sartre seems to presume, universal validity[204]. For Merleau-Ponty, "this singular that he permits himself – the for-itself, the for-others – indicates that he means to speak in the name of all, and that in his description he implies the power to speak for all, whereas his description contests this power" (VI 79). Merleau-Ponty's methodology hence reveals some of the aporias of Sartre's text that elude the author's intention, but more importantly, Merleau-Ponty also illustrates that the respect shown for the other's alterity is only apparent. In the end, Sartre "makes of the

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[202]This cannot be justified as yet, but it is worth pointing out that Derrida also seeks to preserve the alterity of the other by prioritising the aspects of the other that resist appropriation, and by emphasising that it is towards such aspects of the other that responsibility should be directed. The extent to which Derrida consequently engenders an "agnosticism in regard to the other" is examined in chapters nine and ten.

[203]Lévinas, E., "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977, p 55.

[204]Herbert Marcuse also denigrates the way in which Sartre's existentialism, which is supposed to be about concrete human existence, actually makes a universal ontology of conflict. According to Marcuse, Sartre's master-slave dialectic simply describes a capitalist conception of relations with the other. See Marcuse, H., "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Etre et Le Neant*" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. VIII, 1948, p 317–30.

other an anonymous, faceless obsession, an other in general" (VI 72). And Sartre does seem to have no notion of a specific Other, but only this faceless, untouchable Other, who is absolutely transcendent. Indeed, the Other for Sartre is almost a God, which might explain his consistent capitalising of the term.

With this emphasis on an absolute Other, it is unsurprising that Sartre seems unable to admit of degrees. As he famously suggests, in deciding and acting for ourselves, we are also responsible for all humanity (BN 553–6). In-itself this is not necessarily a ludicrous suggestion, and it arguably has some rather generous humanitarian consequences. However, responsibility for a singular other, or even a local community, is rarely considered in Sartre's major works, and while he has published articles on anti-semitism and 'negritude', they are also of debatable salience. An ethics which would further consider such matters was promised but did not eventuate, most probably because Sartre's ontology precluded that very possibility. His enduring subject-object opposition allows little room for the ethical, which is well-conceived of as a relation between terms, and if Merleau-Ponty's philosophy accomplishes anything of note, it is in providing an ontology of relations and one that can accommodate difference without reifying it.

However, with a view to this thesis' forthcoming consideration of Derrida's notion of the wholly other (*tout autre*), it is important to reaffirm that, for Merleau-Ponty, this positing of a faceless, anonymous other, is far from the best way to preserve the alterity of the other[205]. In attempting to keep the other entirely sacrosanct, the other's existence is actually threatened. None of this, however, is necessary. Merleau-Ponty argues that:

> For the other to be truly the other [*and he is referring to an other who retains their alterity and yet nevertheless impacts upon and interacts with us*], it does not suffice and it is not necessary that he be a scourge, the continued threat of an absolute reversal of pro and con, a judge himself elevated above all contestation, without place, *without relativities*, faceless like an obsession and capable of crushing me with a glance into the dust of my world. It is necessary and it suffices that he have the power to decenter me, to oppose his centering to my own, and he

[205] As will become apparent in chapter nine, in a certain sense Derrida's notion of the wholly other (*tout autre*) also posits a rather faceless and absolute conception of alterity. After all, the wholly other is precisely that which cannot be imbued with any determinate characteristics, and which cannot be named, as it forever exceeds our horizons of significance (MO 71).

> can do so only because we are not two nihilations installed in two universes of the in-itself, incomparable, but two entries to the same Being, each accessible to but one of us (*my italics*, VI 82).

Intuitively at least, there is much to recommend Merleau-Ponty's suggestions. Certainly it is difficult to argue with the suggestion that it is "only by backing down on the alleged ubiquity of the vision, by forgoing the idea of being everything, that is, of being nothing, by learning to know, within the vision itself, a sort of palpitation of the things... an inherence" (VI 83), that we will truly relate to the other. Clearly Merleau-Ponty and Sartre have vastly different conceptions regarding what a genuine "other" is, and they also use the category of the other to explain and elucidate different phenomena. Sartre's other is conceived of in terms of what influence they have upon the for-itself, the subject. Merleau-Ponty's other revolves around a recognition of our mutual interdependence, and the way in which the other is always encroaching upon us. Relativism cannot save Sartre here, however, as more often than not, it is not just a faceless other who impacts upon us; rather it is usually an other known to us (and often intimately so), with a shared history, whose being in places overlaps and encroaches upon our own.

This intimacy and these experiences that we share with the other (which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy accommodates to a far greater extent than Sartre's) must necessarily have consequences for our phenomenological and existential experiences of the other which Sartre sought to describe. Certainly, we often experience shame and guilt as Sartre shows us. Nevertheless, are these and the other vast array of emotions which we experience treated with justice and in their full complexity when analysed via their relation to this anonymous other that permeates Sartre's dialectic? The emotions that Sartre describes seem somewhat exaggerated by the necessary inaccessibility of his Other (cf. to the shame described in his famous keyhole incident), although the rejoinder may certainly be put that at least Sartre considers the emotions, which is something that Merleau-Ponty rarely does. And this is true, although Merleau-Ponty's conception of the other as sharing an inherence in being does promise the possibility of an analysis of emotions, as well as ethical relations more generally, of a more sophisticated kind.

In the terms of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty's demand for a recognition of our 'inherence' is to advocate nothing more than an understanding of the dimensions and ambiguous state of the body-subject. As the condition and context through which one can have any relations to objects, the body is both immanent and

transcendent, if such a vocabulary is needed, and this knowledge of the body cannot be attained by abstractly reflecting upon it as Cartesianism and ultimately Sartre have done. Perhaps it is largely on account of the philosophical tradition's emphasis upon abstract, retrospective, and rational reflection, that we binarise and dichotomise. Of course, there is a sense in which reflection cannot be anything other than retrospective. Even Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment cannot recapture the exigencies of lived experience and this is not something that he wants to claim. Nevertheless, certain philosophies manage to evoke this lived experience better than others and Merleau-Ponty's suggestions in this regard are insightful. The practicalities of embodied action do seem to disavow the dualistic oscillations between subject and object that Sartre's philosophy imbues with such pessimistic connotations. Moreover, in lucidly describing the rationalistic emphasis upon the mind which has made the problematic of both solipsism and the master-slave dialectic such deeply tempting philosophical positions, Merleau-Ponty's work constitutes an achievement of the highest estimation, since in understanding the reasons for their allure, we can perhaps finally put them to rest.

8. Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, and the Alterity of the Other

In providing the foundation for a conception of other people that does not fall into the related traps of either solipsism or the master-slave dialectic, it nevertheless cannot be claimed that Merleau-Ponty thereby avoids all problematic conceptions of alterity. Another set of questions for him are proffered by Lévinas, Foucault and Derrida, all of whom have suggested that the exclusion of the ethical other tends to be a major problem for phenomenology[206]. To simplify, their shared suggestion is that in affirming context, phenomenology only allows the other to disclose that which the subject has prepared for. Phenomenology is hence envisaged as paying only minimal attention to the other conceived of as irremediably different, and similar claims have also been propounded regarding the specific phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, most notably by Lévinas – whose arguments will soon be addressed – and more recently by Claude Lefort.

At the meeting of the Merleau-Ponty Circle that was held at the University of Rhode Island in 1987, Lefort accuses his former teacher of being unable to thematise the more asymmetrical aspects of alterity experienced by the infant in their absolute dependence upon mother, father, and somewhat synonymously – for Lacan at least – the symbolic order. Lefort argues that this is because of the ontological priority that Merleau-Ponty accords to the reversibility thesis which, according to his interpretation, presupposes a reciprocity between self and other that does not adequately account for our relationship with alterity in all situations[207]. This claim has occasioned much debate, with many theorists leaping to Merleau-Ponty's defence by arguing that Lefort misconstrues Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility[208]. Now, Lefort's arguments have a largely psychoanalytic register that cannot be directly engaged with in this chapter, but the general outline of the debate that he initiated makes explicit an enduring concern of what

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[206]We have previously contemplated Derrida's criticisms of phenomenology at some length (see chapters three and five), and this chapter will begin by considering Lévinas' criticisms of phenomenology as they are expressed in his essays "Meaning and Sense" and "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977.

[207]Lefort, C., "Flesh and Otherness" in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Johnson & Smith, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990, p 9.

[208]Both Gary Madison and Martin Dillon argue that Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility is not simply about the immanent projection of the touching-touched divergence upon the rest of the world (as they rightly suggest Lefort is committed to arguing). This will be explicated later in this chapter, but see Madison, G., "Flesh as Otherness", & Dillon, M., "*Écart*: A Reply to Lefort's 'Flesh and Otherness'" in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Johnson & Smith, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990, p 28 & 21. For a sustained discussion of the differences between Dillon's and Lefort's positions, see Bell, J., *The Problem of Difference: Phenomenology and Poststructuralism*, p 164–180.

might be loosely termed 'postmodern' thought. Lefort's suggestion that Merleau-Ponty cannot thematise radical alterity is rather intimately related to the position of Lévinas, and also to the arguments that Derrida and Foucault have raised about phenomenology more generally. All of these theorists imbue an asymmetrical priority to a conception of alterity that exceeds all of our resources for attempting to describe it, and while it cannot be argued that Merleau-Ponty valorises the other in their absolute difference as Lévinas and to a lesser extent Derrida do, this chapter will examine how his work relates to this type of paradigm.

Moreover, it will be the spectre of Derrida, indebted as he is to the Lévinasian treatment of the other[209], which will motivate much of this discussion, even if he is rarely mentioned by name. The significance of this comparison will become clearer as this thesis progresses, but oddly enough, to compare Derrida and Merleau-Ponty on alterity is actually to start to think about the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's analysis opens the deconstructive treatment of the other up to alternative and possibly more promising formulations, although establishing that is very much a longitudinal concern.

It is first necessary to establish that Merleau-Ponty can be envisaged as according due recognition to alterity. In this respect, *The Visible and the Invisible* will be considered in the light of some fundamental criticisms that Lévinas has made in regard to Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity. Lévinas' various arguments against Merleau-Ponty can be schematised to reveal two main claims, and the first of these pertains to Lévinas' more general assertion that phenomenology invariably amounts to what he calls an "imperialism of the same"[210]. In his seminal essay "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", Lévinas contends that by insisting upon the importance of horizons and contexts, phenomenology either precludes the possibility of something being absolutely other, or if it considers the other, it does so only in terms of a more derivative otherness that the subject has already been prepared for. According to him, phenomenology hence ensures that the other can be considered only on the condition of surrendering their difference. "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" does not explicitly relate this assertion that phenomenology engenders an "imperialism of the same" to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, but Lévinas' frequent criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of alterity

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[209]The degree to which Derrida either partakes in, or criticises the Lévinasian conception of alterity, is the main problem of the following chapter. It will be argued that Derrida ultimately privileges a rather similar account of alterity, despite his rather frequent criticisms of Lévinas.
[210]Lévinas, E., "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p 55.

leave us in little doubt that he thinks that Merleau-Ponty can also be adequately encapsulated by such a description. Indeed, as will soon be apparent, two of Lévinas' more recently translated texts propound a similar argument in relation to Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis.

Lévinas' second and related problem with Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity, is basically that it is overly positive. Along similar lines to a criticism made by Emile Brehier some years earlier (although perhaps with a little more sophistication)[211], Lévinas argues that Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the genesis of the represented other presupposes the non-indifferent constitution of intersubjectivity. Cathryn Vasseleu is among those to have examined these suggestions in detail[212], but for the purposes of this chapter it needs only to be pointed out that Lévinas' criticisms do not revolve simply around the fact that Merleau-Ponty highlights the non-indifferent aspects of our existence, and it is difficult to see how anybody could suggest that we encounter others with genuine indifference, least of all Lévinas. Indeed, Lévinas argues that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy actually goes one step further than this, and his discontent with Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjectivity revolves around the claim that it is sustained by what he terms "an unaccountable affection"[213]. In other words, Lévinas thinks that Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of alterity are overly optimistic, in that they unjustifiably presuppose a social unity between self and other.

In the process of exploring Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjectivity, this chapter will address these two related claims. Before turning to consider *The Visible and the Invisible*, however, it is worth recognising that his philosophy does occasionally appear to efface the difference between self and other. He attempts to legitimise this in various different ways, including through a quasi-psychological analysis of the behaviour of babies. In his essay "The Child's Relations with Others", Merleau-Ponty argues, following Lacan, that the child does not distinguish between self and external world in any meaningful way prior to the mirror stage. According to Merleau-Ponty, the infant's relations with others are typified by what he terms "transitivism", in that the infant cries not because another discrete individual is crying, but as if they actually are that other

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[211]In *The Primacy of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discusses Brehier's criticism that his phenomenology can speak only of the other in terms of their relations with us (that is ethically) and not as "this person who suffices to himself". Without digressing unduly, Merleau-Ponty's response is basically that we never encounter this other who suffices to himself, but always an ethical other (PrP 28).
[212]Vasseleu, C., *Textures of Light*, p 64.
[213]Vasseleu, C., p 64.

child (PrP 119). In other words, they identify with the other as if they are the same, and for Merleau-Ponty, this type of identification resounds throughout adult life in such a way that self and other have a tendency to encroach upon one another (PrP 147).

We cannot justify or cast aspersions upon the psychological aspects of this idea here, but in this tendency to collapse the other into the self it does appear that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon ambiguity is somewhat diluted in regard to his descriptions of relations with the other. Parts of *Phenomenology of Perception* also have an inherently positive emphasis and it cannot be denied that Lévinas' claim that Merleau-Ponty's work is sustained by an unaccountable affection is an understandable interpretation of some major aspects of this work. It seems to me, however, that this feeling of affection that can be discerned in Merleau-Ponty's early work is more a flaw of exposition, and of his preoccupation with refuting Sartre and the conflict inherent in the master-slave dialectic, than of the ontology that is presupposed by and indirectly involved in this earlier text.

After all, even in his earlier philosophy, Merleau-Ponty regularly speaks of the paradox of immanence and transcendence (PrP 18), and he insists that far from being mutually exclusive, the two concepts actually require each other. In elaborating upon the paradox that transcendence is always betrothed to immanence, and vice versa, he makes it clear that the "transcendence always contains something more than what is actually given" (PrP 16) and it is this something more that escapes or resists assimilation. The other can hence never be completely divested of their otherness, because in immanence there is always also some form of transcendence, although there is nevertheless a moral problem regarding nullifying that alterity. According to Merleau-Ponty, however, this is a problem posed by life itself, rather than a dilemma that is specific to, or exacerbated by the phenomenological milieu (PrP 30). And of course, we all do frequently encounter this type of aporia in our relations with other people. If we care about somebody enough to want to get to know them fully, we find that there is always something enigmatic about them that eludes us. This phenomenon of our lived experience is certainly not something that Merleau-Ponty wishes to deny.

On the contrary, even in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he continually emphasises the ability of the other to surprise us and to reveal aspects of themselves that we had hitherto not been aware of. As Michael Yeo suggests, Merleau-Ponty emphasises our capacity to "win from the speech of the other something more and perhaps different

than one puts into it"[214], and this provides for the possibility of the new (including the disconcerting) to emerge from our experience.

As something of a subject-based philosophy (although I disagree with Merleau-Ponty about precisely how subject-based *Phenomenology of Perception* is[215]), many of his discussions regarding the other are expressed in terms of their effect upon the body-subject. This type of philosophy of consciousness is phenomenology's most commonly acknowledged domain, and while Merleau-Ponty widens phenomenology's resources by affirming a body-subject, he is nevertheless intent on emphasising that not only can interactions with the other involve us in a renewed appreciation of their alterity (ie. the ways in which they elude us), the other is equally importantly also that which allows us to surprise ourselves, and to move beyond the various horizons and expectations that govern our daily lives. Dialogue with the other, for example, enables us to not only develop more sophisticated ways of thinking, but even to "discover" and be astounded by our own thoughts (PP 177). This phenomenon of surprise only begins to highlight the ways in which Merleau-Ponty attempts to avoid the conception of the other as domesticated by the subject's horizons of significance. Surprise and disorientation disrupt these already acquired meanings, and revolve around the ineluctable fact that interaction with the other often differs significantly from one's expectations and from the contexts that are brought to bear upon a situation. In this respect at least, there is in no sense an effacement of the otherness of the other, precisely because it is the other's alterity that induces change in the subject. Merleau-Ponty considers this overlapping and transformative interaction between self and other to be vitally important, to the extent that one could cogently claim that any absolute dichotomy between self and other is rendered untenable. The other encroaches upon the self because identification and community is already presupposed (eg. in childhood), but also because alterity is that which literally alters for Merleau-Ponty.

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[214]Yeo, M., "Perceiving/Reading the Other: Ethical Dimensions", p 45.

[215]In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty rejects his earlier philosophy for presupposing a philosophy of consciousness (VI 183), but it is also worth bearing in mind his argument in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that "if the perceiving I is genuinely an I, it cannot perceive a different one; if the perceiving I is anonymous, the other which it perceives is equally so" (PP 356). While phrased in a negative manner, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that the ambiguity of human perception requires a subject that cannot be identical with itself (self-present), so it is a philosophy whose 'subjective orientation' is already in the process of being problematised. Merleau-Ponty is often overly harsh in his retrospective accounts of his earlier work, and Jacques Taminiaux makes a similar argument in his essay "Phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty's Late Work" (see *Life-World and Consciousness: Essays for Aron Gurwitsch*, ed. Embree, trans. Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972, p 307–8).

In attempting to explain this conception of alterity as that which literally alters, Merleau-Ponty has enigmatically suggested that "I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts" (S 159). This formulation might seem somewhat misleading, in that it almost reads like a reinvention of an antiquated idealism – which is exactly what phenomenology is sometimes claimed to be. However, this statement also pertains in inverse fashion and this ensures that the other must borrow themselves from me, create me with their thoughts, and it is this interactive and transformative element of alterity that remains an enduring focus of his philosophy. More detail will soon be accorded to the explication of this position, but these aspects of Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy, which already seem capable of refuting Lévinas' implied suggestion that he makes the other nothing but the projection of the subject's own aims and ambitions, are expanded upon in his later philosophy, and in particular by *The Visible and the Invisible*.

In this respect, it is worth recalling that in an essay that was unpublished in his own lifetime, Merleau-Ponty describes his philosophical career as falling into two distinct phases: he tells us that the first phase of his work – up to and including *Phenomenology of Perception* – involved an attempt to restore the world of perception and to affirm the primacy of the pre-reflective cogito. In other words, in this period he was intent on emphasising an inherence in the world that is more fundamental than our thinking/reflective capacities. The second distinct phase of his work, which refers predominantly to *The Visible and the Invisible*, as well as to the abandoned *The Prose of the World*, is characterised as an attempt "to show how communication with others, and thought, take up and go beyond the realm of perception"[216]. This is important for several reasons, not least that it suggests a fairly major change in direction. The idea that communication with others goes beyond the realm of perception, is sufficiently radical to put him at odds with at least a certain definition of phenomenology.

Ostensibly in opposition to this type of characterisation, Martin Dillon has emphasised that these two major periods of Merleau-Ponty's career are actually intimately connected. Dillon downplays the significance of quotes from Merleau-Ponty like that which has just been cited and instead insists that *The Visible and the Invisible* is primarily concerned with bringing the results of the earlier work, which are often

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[216]This particular quotation, as well as Merleau-Ponty's more general claim regarding these two distinct periods of his work, can be found in an essay that was unpublished in his own lifetime and which has been subsequently titled "An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty", and is included in Fisher's collection. See Fisher, A., ed. *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty*, New York: Harcourt, 1969, p 367–8.

primarily psychological, to their ontological explication. Merleau-Ponty has also suggested similar things at times (VI 176), and according to this type of account, the ontology of his later philosophy was already implied in his earlier works[217].

Despite agreeing with the broad outlines of Dillon's position, there are nevertheless some problems with such a characterisation that suggest that the truth of this dispute might lie somewhere between these respective accounts. In comparing Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the Sartrean other in his two major philosophical texts (PP & VI), one detects a significant difference in focus and this partially validates the conclusion that his career is typified by two reasonably different periods. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty continually stresses that the conflict of Sartre's master-slave dialectic must always presuppose something shared, and this largely explains the "unaccountable affection" that Lévinas discerns in his work. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, however, it is no longer the conflict with the other that so bothers him about Sartre's depiction, but it is actually what he takes to be Sartre's paradoxical refusal to respect alterity that most concerns him. According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's "agnosticism in regard to the other's being for himself, which appeared to guarantee his alterity, suddenly appears as the worst of infringements upon it" (VI 79). The suggestion being propounded is that far from safeguarding the other's alterity, the description of the other as forever inaccessible and incomprehensible (as nothing more than a "freedom which transcends my freedom"[218]) actually trivialises it, and one consequence of this is that it also artificially renders the other as nothing but a threat. Far from merely being a negative thing, the alterity of the other is too complicated and multifarious to be simply posited as that which will forever elude us, and such a description also ignores the important ways in which an individual must borrow themselves from the other and yet also be created by the other – that is, the way in which self and other are partially intertwined.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* then, there is a tacit claim regarding what a responsible treatment of the alterity of the other consists in, even if Merleau-Ponty rarely considers notions like responsibility in any explicit fashion[219]. His final ontology wants to

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[217]Dillon, M., *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, p 154–6.
[218]Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness*, p 363, 377.
[219]Of course, Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic* contain some important implications regarding political responsibility in their negotiations with Marxism and Sartre respectively. Diana Coole's book, *Negativity and Politics,* is a helpful resource in delineating the politics implied by Merleau-Ponty's hyper-dialectics. However, while Merleau-Ponty does have this significance

insist that the other should not be conceived of only in terms of their inaccessibility and how they resist understanding. Rather, alterity is something that can only be appreciated in being encountered and in a recognition of the fact that there can be no absolute alterity. If absolute alterity is but a synonym of death and inconceivable to humanity, then what needs to be considered, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the paradoxical way in which self and other are intertwined, and yet also, and at the same time, divergent.

Indeed, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty is also careful not to fall prey to what has been termed, sometimes disparagingly, the horizonality of phenomenology. He devotes an entire chapter entitled "Interrogation and Intuition" to distancing himself from this tendency of phenomenology – which he variously traces to Hegel, Husserl and Bergson – to subsume all else under the concept of context and background. Engendering a coincidence between self and world (or self and other) is just as antithetical to his philosophical purposes as advocating a vast abyssal difference, and Merleau-Ponty asserts that when we are overly sure of the other, just as when we are overly unsure of the other, an inadequate apprehension of human relations beckons. For him, alterity is that which cannot be reduced to the logic of an either/or, as he does not intend to espouse a Sartrean version of human relations where the other is so transcendent that they can never really be understood, and yet nor does his philosophy reductively ignore this alterity. He suggests that "this infinite distance, this absolute proximity express in two ways – as a soaring over or as fusion – the same relationship with the thing itself. They are two positivisms..." (VI 127), indeed, neither of which he wants to associate with his new ontology.

In an effort to avoid this dualistic tendency to conceive of the other as either forever beyond the comprehension of a subject, or as entirely domesticated by the subject and their horizons of significance, the final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* proposes an ontology that emphasises the chiasmic intertwining of various different notions. Most importantly for this chapter's purposes, it also suggests that a chiasmic relationship obtains between self and other. However, before considering how the figure of the chiasm might be envisaged to characterise the relationship between self and other, it is necessary to briefly re-examine Merleau-Ponty's more general use of this term and his associated theory of reversibility.

Rather than maintaining a traditional dualism in which mind and body, subject

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in regard to issues of responsibility, he does not always make it explicit himself.

and object, self and other, etc., are discrete and separate entities, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is an important sense in which such pairs are also associated. For example, he does not dispute that there is a divergence or dehiscence in our embodied situation that is evident in the difference that exists between touching and being touched, between looking and being looked at, or between the sentient and the sensible. On the contrary, this divergence (*écart*) is considered to be a necessary and constitutive factor in allowing subjectivity to be possible at all. However, he argues that rather than involving a simple dualism, this divergence between the sentient and the sensible also allows for the possibility of overlapping and encroachment between these two terms. For example, Merleau-Ponty has famously suggested that the experience of touching cannot be understood without reference to the tacit potential for this situation to be reversed. This reversibility thesis has been explicated in depth in chapter four, but it suffices to point out that according to him, the experience of being touched actually supervenes upon the experience of touching, and vice versa, in such a way that we can never unambiguously contend that we are simply touching, or are simply being touched, because there is always an embodied awareness of this "imminent reversibility" (VI 147). In other words, we can experience ourselves as touching only if we also have a recognition of our own tangibility and our capacity to be touched by others, and this means that our embodied subjectivity is never purely located in either our tangibility or in our touching, but at their intersection and where the two lines of a chiasm intertwine and cross. The chiasm then, is simply an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the same thing.

According to Merleau-Ponty, however, these observations retain an applicability that extends well beyond the relationship that obtains between touching and being touched. He also contends that mind and body (VI 247, 259), the perceptual faith and its articulation (VI 87–93), subject and object, self and world (VI 123), as well as many other related dualisms, are all associated chiasmically, and he terms the interdependence of these various different notions the flesh (VI 248–51). The rather radical consequences of this intertwining become most obvious when Merleau-Ponty sets about describing the interactions of this embodied flesh. At one stage in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he argues that the realisation that the world is not simply an object:

> Does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the

> contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things (VI 123).

According to Merleau-Ponty then, this non-dualistic divergence between touching and being touched, which necessitates some form of encroachment between the two terms, also means that the world is capable of encroaching upon and altering us, just as we are capable of altering it. Such an ontology rejects any absolute antinomy between self and world, as well as any notion of subjectivity that prioritises a rational, autonomous individual who is capable of imposing their choice upon a situation that is entirely external to them (although this is not to rule out the possibility of responsibility). To put the problem in Sartrean terms, while it may sometimes prove efficacious to distinguish between transcendence and facticity, or Being-for-itself and Being-in-itself, Merleau-Ponty argues that such notions also overlap in such a way as to undermine any absolute difference between these two terms. As a consequence, Sartre's conception of an absolute freedom in regard to a situation is also rendered untenable by the recognition of the ways in which self and world are chiasmically intertwined[220], although this is not to suggest that the world can be reduced to us. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly asserts that precisely what is rarely considered is this paradoxical fact that although we are *of* the world, we are nevertheless not *the* world (VI 127), and in affirming the interdependence of humanity and the 'things' of the world in a way that permits neither fusion nor absolute distance, he advocates an embodied inherence of a different type. More significantly for the purposes of this chapter, his descriptions also pertain directly to the problem of the alterity of the other.

After all, this chiasmic relationship ensures that in some sense the other is always intertwined within the subject, and Merleau-Ponty explicitly suggests that self and non-self are but the obverse and reverse of each other (VI 83, 160). In short, his later philosophy reinforces that self and other are relationally constituted via their potential reversibility. One example of this might be the way in which looking at another person – or even a painter looking at trees, according to Merleau-Ponty's controversial example in "Eye and Mind" (PrP 167) – always also involves the tacit recognition that we too can be

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[220]These differences between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre have been analysed in greater depth in the previous chapter, and have also been argued for by John Compton. See Compton, J., "Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and

looked at. However, rather than simply oscillating between these two modes of being, looker and looked upon, as Sartrean philosophy would have it, for Merleau-Ponty each experience is betrothed to the other in such a way that we are never simply a disembodied looker or a transcendental consciousness. The alterity of the other's look is always already involved in us, and rather than unduly exalting alterity by positing it as forever elusive, or as recognisable only as freedom that transcends my freedom, he instead affirms an interdependence of self and other that involves these categories overlapping and intertwining with one another, but without ever being reduced to each other.

However, it is precisely this emphasis upon a self-other reversibility with which Lévinas disagrees, and it is worth considering two of Lévinas' more recent essays on Merleau-Ponty. In both "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty" and "Sensibility", Lévinas reaffirms the criticisms of Merleau-Ponty that have already been ascribed to him – ie. an imperialism of the same, and an unaccountable affection – but he also imbues them with more concrete content, particularly in relation to Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon reversibility. While Lévinas accepts Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of reversibility as they pertain to an individual touching themselves while touching another object – he describes it as a "remarkable analysis"[221] – he is not so sure about extending this type of reversibility to the alterity of another person, as Merleau-Ponty does.

For example, as Lefort has also been quick to point out[222], at one stage Merleau-Ponty asks:

> Why would this generality [*the sentient-sensible divergence*] which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible... Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly (*my italics*, VI 142).

In "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty", Lévinas explicitly considers this suggestion that the handshake is reversible. However, he asks: "one may especially wonder, then, whether such a relation, the ethical relation, is not imposed across a *radical separation* between the two hands"[223]. Lévinas hence argues that even if the touching-

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Human Freedom" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1982, p 577–588.
[221]Lévinas, E., "Sensibility" in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Johnson & Smith, trans. Smith, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990, p 63.
[222]Lefort, C., "Flesh and Otherness", p 8.
[223]Lévinas, E., "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty" in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Johnson & Smith, trans. Smith, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990, p 59.

touched relationship between one's own hands is as Merleau-Ponty describes it, to presume that this also applies between the hands of two people is to make something of a logical leap, and to tacitly reintroduce an imperialism of the same. After all, it seems that the apparent 'immanence' of the touching-touched relationship is superimposed upon that which is ostensibly transcendent – ie. alterity. This is also what Lefort's critique of Merleau-Ponty amounts to when he argues that the body's internal divergence between the sentient and the sensible is projected upon the relation with the other[224]. According to Lévinas and Lefort alike, Merleau-Ponty superimposes the experience of the body upon the structure of our relations with the other, and without due consideration of the differences between them.

Now, these criticisms seem to miss their target. In the touching-touched dynamic that Merleau-Ponty so consistently describes, the world clearly encroaches upon the body as much as vice versa. To characterise this reversibility as immanent is simply incorrect, as the world and others are conceived of as always already encroaching upon the body. In "Eye and Mind", Merleau-Ponty concludes with the words inscribed on Paul Klee's tomb – "I cannot be caught in immanence" (PrP 188) – and it is not the case that there is a self-contained experience of the body that can afterwards be imposed upon the problem of others. On the contrary, the alterity of the other and our own alterity (ie. the touching-touched divergence) are mutually encroaching, without ever being reducible to the other, and also without an ontological priority being accorded to either term, and this will be emphasised in chapter ten.

Moreover, it is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty does not consider the various instances of reversibility that he delineates – ie. an individual touching their own hand, and shaking the hand of another person – to be exactly the same, as both Lévinas and Lefort imply. The various reversible structures that he describes cannot simply be conflated, as that would be to propound something tantamount to a Hegelian dialectic, not a hyper-dialectic that seeks to avoid any final synthesis (VI 95). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly argues that there is a difference between the reflexivity involved in hearing one's own voice and hearing the voice of another. As he says, "I am always on the side of my body" (VI 148), and this means that the reversibility involved in touching one's own hands is not exactly the same as that which obtains when I shake someone

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[224]Lefort, C., "Flesh and Otherness", p 8–9.

else's hands[225], but there is a nevertheless an isomorphism of function that allows me to encroach upon and perceptually interact with the other, when I shake his or her hand.

Dillon and Madison also point out these type of problems with Lefort's interpretation of the reversibility thesis, but there is another important aspect of Merleau-Ponty's account that resists such an interpretation, and which Dillon and Madison do not deal with at any length. Lefort's and Lévinas' criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are also misplaced because they ignore his tacit ethical import. In order to establish this, it is necessary to recall an important remark from Merleau-Ponty's essay, "The Philosopher and His Shadow". He contends that: "I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts. This is no failure to perceive others, it is the perception of others" (S 159). In other words, Merleau-Ponty argues that the fact that I encroach upon the other in perception – eg. by tacitly putting myself in that place of that which is seen, or by lending the other something of my own tangibility when I touch them – is not necessarily a failure to perceive their genuine alterity.

Now, Lévinas explicitly considers this remark of Merleau-Ponty's, as well as the essay from which it derives. In "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty", Lévinas suggests that "one must wonder whether this way of affirming a positivity in a phenomenon that, at first sight, and from a certain point of view, appears as privation does not require the indication of a new dimension that would accredit that positivity"[226]. I will soon illustrate precisely why Merleau-Ponty considers this borrowing from others to be a positive phenomenon, but it is clear that Lévinas cannot understand why the way that we borrow ourselves from others, and create others from our own thoughts, should not be understood as a failure of perception. For him, it indicates that perception cannot get us to the genuine alterity of the other, but on the contrary, remains ensnared in epistemological concerns. Indeed, in "Sensibility", Lévinas again explicitly asks: "how can a *knowledge* in which the perceived is neither grasped nor found in its object, but only lent to it [*or borrowed from it*], mean anything but the failure of perception's very intentions? (*my italics*)"[227].

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[225]As well as problematising the claims of Lefort, this also challenges the position of James Phillips, who argues that Merleau-Ponty very rarely makes any distinction between the structure of our relations with others and the structure of our relations with the world. See Phillips, J., "From the Unseen to the Invisible" in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, eds. Olkowski & Morley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, p 80.
[226]Lévinas, E., "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty", p 58.
[227]Lévinas, E., "Sensibility", p 64.

This reference to epistemology is important, and is a persistent theme of Lévinas' writings on Merleau-Ponty. Lévinas even argues that in Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the touching-touched relationship, "the order of consciousness is not broken by sociality any differently from the way it is by *knowledge*, which, joining the *known*, immediately coincides with what may have been foreign to it"[228]. In response to this, it needs be reaffirmed that precisely what Merleau-Ponty's touching-touched relationship cannot achieve is coincidence (VI 147), and nor, for that matter, can his epistemology (VI 121–2). Moreover, Lévinas also presumes that Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the handshake remain on an epistemological level, but is this fair? After all, it is not simply an epistemological proof of the other that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy provides, but an onto-phenomenological one that also has an ethical relevance. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty considers this lending/borrowing situation where self and other encroach upon one another to be positive precisely because he is not making a purely epistemological point. Without the perceptual encroachment between self and other that he delineates, an absolute alterity is fetishised (the other is that which resists perception, as well as every attempt to thematise it) and the problem of solipsism seems to have returned through the back door. As Dorothea Olkowski has pertinently put it, "if there is to be room in the world for others as others, there must be some connection between self and other that exceeds purely psychic life"[229], and Merleau-Ponty envisages this as an ontological necessity, rather than as an attempt to propound a thesis that restores us to the primordial affection that we have for the other.

That said, Lévinas is right to be wary of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, at least insofar as it contests aspects of his own philosophy. Indeed, one consequence of Merleau-Ponty's position is that questions regarding the otherness of the other are rendered something of an abstraction, at least if they conceive of that alterity without reference to the subjectivity with which it is always chiasmically intertwined[230]. For Merleau-Ponty, a responsible treatment of alterity consists in recognising that alterity is always intertwined

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[228]Lévinas, E., "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty", p 59.
[229]Olkowski, D., "The Continuum of Interiority and Exteriority in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty" in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, eds. Olkowski & Morley, p 4.
[230]Of course, Lévinas' treatment of touching in *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence* is complicated. At times, he seems to imply that embodied relations involve an 'interpenetration' of self and other, and the extent to which the other maintains an absolute distance is hence riddled with more tension than is commonly presumed. While a sustained examination of Lévinas' work may have been beneficial in this regard, forthcoming chapters will argue that many of the differences between Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's conceptions of alterity also apply between Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas (see chapter nine).

within subjectivity, rather than by obscuring this fact by projecting a self-present individual who is confronted by an alterity that is inaccessible and beyond comprehension. Exactly what kind of responsibility Merleau-Ponty's position entails will be explicated throughout the remainder of this thesis, but for the moment these observations suggest that his thought is misrepresented where it is categorised as indifferent to the alterity of the other, and also where it is criticised for unjustifiably presupposing an affectionate bond with that alterity.

Of course, there is a minimal sense in which Merleau-Ponty's work does ensure that the other is a part of our system of reference. He emphasises that the other is always already encroaching upon us (without being reducible to us), and in this respect cannot remain a pure other as Lévinas seems to desire. But Merleau-Ponty's distaste for such absolute conceptions of alterity has already been illustrated in relation to Sartre, and for Merleau-Ponty, the risk of this overlapping with the other can and should always be there (VI 123). His philosophy consistently alludes to the manner in which this encroachment is not simply a bad thing and something to be avoided at all costs, like a shy teenager might ignore the overtures of those reaching out to them. For Merleau-Ponty, interacting with and influencing the other (even contributing to permanently changing them) does not necessarily constitute a denial of their alterity. On the contrary, if done properly it in fact attests to it, because we are open to the possibility of being influenced and changed by the difference that they bring to bear upon our interaction with them. This ethic of mutual transformation is not an imperialism of the same, as the sanctity of the self must be breached in any meaningful interaction with alterity.

We are now in a position to see why Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity does not succumb to Lévinas' fundamental criticism of it. An imperialism of the same would be any totalising system of judgement (whether it be personal, philosophical or political) that ensured that the other could gain entry into a particular world perspective only on the condition of surrendering their difference. What this chapter hopes to have begun to illustrate, however, is that for Merleau-Ponty the other is truly other, only if they gain entry into this world perspective by actually altering this totalising system precisely on account of their difference. This is the ethics that his ontology of the flesh tacitly presupposes, and it is a position that is importantly different from those of Sartre, Lévinas and Derrida respectively. Difference is not encountered by preserving it untouched, like a specimen in a jar. Rather difference and alterity are truly experienced only by an

openness that recognises that despite all of the undoubted differences that we encounter, there is always something shared that allows difference to be conceivable at all. This is not an effort to reintegrate difference into sameness, but an insistence upon the importance of transforming the notions of self and other in any attempt to behave responsibly towards the alterity of the other.

8b. Successfully Reading a Text: A Responsible Treatment of the Alterity of the Book

Thus far, this chapter has considered alterity in a somewhat restricted and even humanistic sense, in that the other being referred to has frequently focused upon our literal encounter with another person. It is this focus that was largely responsible for making the existentialism of the 1940s so seductive, but it is also partly why it is currently somewhat out of favour intellectually. Broadening this treatment of the other is a task that is certainly congruent with Derrida's deconstructive intent to disavow all such subject-based thinking[231], and it is also something that Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy would endorse. At least according to Merleau-Ponty himself, his final project involves an ontology that would be presented "without compromise with humanism, nor moreover with naturalism, nor finally with theology" (VI 274). Moreover, in *The Prose of the World* he explicitly considers issues like the alterity of the text, rather than merely remaining within the oscillations of the thing-consciousness distinction, and the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to exploring this text's less humanistic conception of what responsibility towards the alterity of the other might involve.

Admittedly, there is a small methodological problem in focusing this analysis upon a text that Merleau-Ponty had abandoned in favour of other projects, but parts of *The Prose of the World* that we will be referring to were actually published by Merleau-Ponty himself. Moreover, they were also considered deserving of inclusion, although perhaps in a substantially revised form, in what would have been a much larger version of *The Visible and the Invisible* than we currently have[232]. The second and more important

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[231] According to Derrida, "the discourse on the subject, even if it locates difference, inadequation, the dehiscence within auto-affection, etc., continues to link subjectivity with man". See "'Eating Well' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Cadava, Connor, Nancy, New York: Routledge, 1991, p 105.

[232] For a detailed account of Merleau-Ponty's publishing intents, see Dillon, M., *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*.

factor in legitimising this discussion of Merleau-Ponty via a partly abandoned text, is that the "indirect ontology" of *The Visible and the Invisible* has already been addressed, and some of the consequences that this text has for alterity have been explicated. This ensures that what follows in our discussion of *The Prose of the World* need not stand alone as an explanation of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of alterity, but will simply deepen the understanding that has been attained through our previous discussions.

Of course, a consideration of the alterity of the text seems to involve a manipulation of the playing field in favour of Derrida. Even if it can be claimed that Derrida's work is primarily philosophical, it is nevertheless heavily textually based, and it is true that in pursuing such themes this chapter is pushing Merleau-Ponty into terrain with which he was less obviously interested. In his essay "Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida", Mark Yount also emphasises this point, and he suggests that despite Merleau-Ponty and Derrida having a very similar conception of reversibility:

> Derrida writes the reflexivity of reading as writing and of a writing that refers to itself, while Merleau-Ponty sees a reflexivity of the body, a touching of touch that lends its "inspired exegesis" to the always unfinished birth of a world (cf. VI 133)[233].

According to Yount then, what separates these two philosophers is their different areas of concern, and he implies that Merleau-Ponty pays only minimal attention to the reflexivity/reversibility of reading as writing, and of a writing that refers to itself. Such a position is intuitively persuasive and it is certainly evident in much of the literature regarding the intersection of these two French thinkers[234], but this chapter will challenge such a characterisation. In our earlier discussion of *The Visible and the Invisible*, it was beginning to become apparent that Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the other entails an ethical relation of mutual grappling and encroachment, where neither self nor other can be conceived of as discrete entities. Contrary to what Yount would have us believe, however, these notions are actually reaffirmed by Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the task of reading as it is presented in *The Prose of the World*. As will soon become apparent, this more textual focus also provides some additional means to further this thesis'

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[233]Yount, M, "Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida", p 222.

[234]As has been indicated elsewhere, I am predominantly referring to articles from the collection of essays entitled *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*, and *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, which considers Merleau-Ponty's relation to postmodernism, and somewhat inevitably to deconstruction.

comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

In this respect, Michael Yeo's essay, "Perceiving/Reading the Other: Ethical Dimensions", is an invaluable resource. Arguing that perception is too narrowing a medium for analysing the experience of others, Yeo instead quotes extensively from *The Prose of the World*, and persuasively suggests that Merleau-Ponty's account of perceiving or phenomenologically encountering the other has its correlate in the reading of texts, and a type of hermeneutics that is often unrecognised in his thought. As Yeo points out, at one stage in *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty explicitly argues that "to perceive other people, is to decipher a language", and he adds that "one cannot help but notice how much the perception of other people becomes increasingly comparable to language"[235]. In and of themselves, these sentiments are not overly helpful in confronting the problem at hand (what a responsible treatment of alterity might consist in), but Merleau-Ponty expands upon these comments to suggest that:

> The same difficulty is involved in understanding how words arranged in propositions can signify anything to us except our own thought, and how the movements of a body patterned into gestures or action can present us with someone else other than ourselves... how we are able to find in these spectacles anything other than what we have put into them (PW 139).

This analogy that Merleau-Ponty draws between the manner in which the body of another can present us with something that is not merely our own projection, and how words, when presented in certain arrangements, always signify something more than merely our own thoughts, is an important one. While Merleau-Ponty is not original in suggesting this type of correlation, it is worth considering his treatment of language in a little more detail in order to ascertain how he thinks that certain types of language, but not all, allow us to move beyond the confines of our own thoughts and a merely solipsistic appraisal of the world.

In attempting to reveal how language might allow for new meaning, Merleau-Ponty begins by way of describing a sterile language that is "in danger of becoming stereotypic", which according to him, "can be distinguished from fertile language" (PW 57). While Derrida might object to the ease of this distinction, it is in abundant evidence in the essays collected in *The Primacy of Perception*, and also in *The Prose of the World*. Employing several different vocabularies, all of which refer to this type of distinction,

Merleau-Ponty's point is basically that our speech (and our writing, for he does not privilege the audible over the written) is governed by both ready-made meanings, and a more fertile and ambiguous mode of expression that can adjust for changing circumstances.

According to Merleau-Ponty, "sedimented language is the language the reader brings with him, the stock of accepted relations between signs and familiar significations, without which we could never have begun to read" (PW 13). In other words, sedimented language is the linguistic equivalent of the horizon that the subject inevitably projects upon the world in which they seek to interact, and into which they place and sometimes even subsume that which they read or encounter in that world. But if horizons were everything, "vibrating the listener's machinery of acquired signification" (PW 142) as Merleau-Ponty puts it, it would not be possible to learn anything. It is for the same reason that in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he insists that our embodied learning, via imitation and habituality, can never be merely a robotic response, but must be a flexible and constantly evolving way of adjusting to circumstances (see chapter six). Even if it is disingenuous to assert that one ever learns something that could be characterised as absolutely new and that bears no relation to our horizons of significance, it seems undeniable that humanity has the capacity to learn, or as in Merleau-Ponty's most favoured example, to win from a particularly prescient novel "something more, and perhaps different, than one puts into it"[236].

According to Merleau-Ponty, the emergence of new meaning, in a linguistic sense, occurs through the dialectical exchange between these two positions, the fertile and the sedimented. In this context, however, it is worth remembering that it is a "hyper-dialectic" that Merleau-Ponty envisages as a productive philosophical resource, as opposed to a dialectic of the kind employed by Hegel and so frequently castigated by thinkers of 'postmodern' persuasion, for whom it often appears that Hegel is the arch-enemy. Merleau-Ponty's conception of a hyper-dialectic seeks a dialectic, but it is one without aims for an ultimate synthesis (VI 95), and equally significantly, the "hyper-dialectic is a thought that would take itself, and the changes it introduces into the spectacle, into account" (VI 38), at least insofar as that is possible. If this conception of how one attains to new meaning is to retain this hyper-dialectical element, it must

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[235]Yeo, M., p 43.
[236]Yeo, M., p 45.

acknowledge that this very description is itself finite, and Merleau-Ponty consistently brackets the terms of his distinctions, including that regarding the difference between sedimented and fertile language that has just been introduced.

Moreover, what he refers to as sedimented language is not the disparaged side of a dualistic hierarchy, as Derrida has insisted is typical of metaphysical thought. Rather than attempting to establish an origin, or to render the one aspect of language primary at the expense of the other, Merleau-Ponty insists that the sedimented and the fertile are interwoven. In a move that we may be becoming familiar with, particularly given Derrida's recent work in which the notions of possibility and impossibility are inextricably intertwined[237], Merleau-Ponty suggests that:

> Everything which exists for me should be mine, and not qualify as a being for me, except on condition of being framed in my field, does not prevent the appearance of the other [*read fertile language*] – on the contrary it makes that appearance possible (*my italics*, PW 138).

Just as immanence and transcendence are two complementary sides of the same perceptual phenomenon, so we are seeing a similar logic in regard to Merleau-Ponty's language distinction. It is the blindness of sedimented language that makes meaning possible and which is the necessary condition for allowing change to come about. Without this background context, genuinely fertile language cannot develop.

Merleau-Ponty's demarcation of these two types of language is worth briefly comparing with the positions espoused by Cora Diamond and Raimond Gaita, among others. These theorists are united by their shared rejection of traditional moral philosophy and their conviction that the vocabularies employed in these increasingly specific domains of moral thought (from Kant to Rawls, from the concept of maximising hedons to whatever else) does not allow these philosophers to get a grip on the lived experience that they are seeking to shed light upon[238]. While their arguments for "linguistic disassociation" are more complicated than this summary might suggest, the essential point to extract is that the only language that can adequately approximate to lived experience – to the horror of the holocaust, for example – is a language that is not restricted to a discrete field of inquiry. Moreover, nor is it a language that has actually become clichéd or sedimented, to use Merleau-Ponty's terminology. Rather, it is a

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[237]Derrida's possible-impossible aporias, and their relevance to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, will be further examined in chapter ten.

language that is poised on the verge of death, that at least has the possibility to become cliché but has not quite fallen over that precipice, which can adequately cope with the complexities of moral issues. This type of juxtaposition between the clichéd and the innovative, the sedimented and the fertile, accurately conveys the manner in which meaning occurs for Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty, it should be remembered, is also convinced that the well-written book "makes use of everything I have contributed, in order to carry me beyond it" (PW 11). It is not difficult to discern a paradox and a circularity here, in that the book uses the reader's own resources to carry them beyond themselves and towards that which is other, but for Merleau-Ponty, this aporetic situation is actually the evidence that "betrays the solipsistic illusion that consists in thinking that every going beyond is a surpassing accomplished by oneself" (VI 143). As in regard to the hermeneutic circle, the key seems to be not in getting out of this paradoxical situation, but as Heidegger has suggested, in coming into it in the right way[239].

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty is equally committed to affirming this, and he begins one paragraph by speculating "*if* the book teaches me something...". As Yeo recognises, this insinuates that the book – or the text, if we agree with Derrida's insistence that the notion of the book falsely connotes a finished and complete totality – may not teach me something and, by implication, we may not reach the other. We may be blind to the other and we may even assuage our surprise at something different by labelling it as "nonsense", "propaganda", or even "perverted". There are any number of derogatory and condescending attitudes that are regularly employed to ensure that one's own particular way of doing things is not threatened. This is certainly a possible way of living and Merleau-Ponty is in no position to deny it, but it is also important to recognise that often books do teach us and interact with our consciousness in surprising ways. Merleau-Ponty argues that for us to truly encounter the alterity that a book makes possible for us (and once more this applies equally to the difference of another person), this must involve us appropriating the annuls of that text. According to him:

> My relation to a book begins with the easy familiarity of the words of our language, of ideas that are part of our make-up, in the same way that my perception of the other is at first sight perception of the gestures and behaviours

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[238]Gaita, R., *A Common Humanity*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999.
[239]Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, Sections 188–192.

> belonging to the 'human species'. But [*and here is the important point*] if the book really teaches me something, if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented. If we are to meet not just through what we have in common, but in what is different between us – which presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well – then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. They must become meaning (*my italics*, PW 142).

This is an intriguing comment and it will take a great deal of unpacking because it makes clear an important and enduring concern of Merleau-Ponty's. He suggests that if we are to experience difference, and by implication alterity, then these differences must cease to be opaque and become meaning. The experience of difference as simply a deviation, or fetishised as something that cannot be addressed within the subject's frame of reference, is for Merleau-Ponty, not yet a genuine experience of the text/other. These differences must first become meaning and this, he tells us, "presupposes a transformation of myself and the other as well". The following quote from the same text makes clearer what he means by this. He suggests that:

> In the perception of the other, this happens [*ie. the transformation of self and other that makes difference meaningful*] when the other organism, instead of 'behaving' like me, engages with the things in my world in a style that is at first mysterious to me, but which at least seems to me a coherent style because it responds to certain possibilities which fringed the things in my world. Similarly, when I am reading, there must be a moment when the author's intention escapes me, where he withdraws himself. Then I catch up from behind, fall into step, or else I turn over a few pages and, a bit later, a happy phrase brings me back and leads me to the core of the new signification, and I find access to it, through one of its 'aspects', which was already part of my experience *(my italics*, PW 142–3).

There is much of significance in this passage, and it reaffirms the suggestion from the previous quotation that "the book really teaches me something", and "the other person is really other", only when difference is reintegrated as meaningful difference. What is the distinction here, one might well ask, and how is difference to become meaning? It seems to describe the simultaneous apprehension of that which is mysterious as nevertheless a coherent and conceivable mode of existence, and more significantly, it is in the disruption of that very effort to comprehend that meaning resides. It seems that the meaning of the other ceases to be opaque in surprise and disorientation, and this rather paradoxical

sentiment reinforces that Merleau-Ponty clearly wants to encourage that which resists preconceived expectations.

At the same time, however, he equally clearly also intends to avoid making the other forever inaccessible and it might hence be asked "in what sense is his other, really other?". If we take the notion of the other to imply being entirely independent and separate, then Merleau-Ponty does not accord this absolute alterity the respect that it warrants. But is this the way that we really encounter otherness? Merleau-Ponty breaks down this idea of the independence of the other in favour of the idea of their interdependence, and the question that this thesis is beginning to pose is whether Merleau-Ponty's definition of the other is closer to the mark than some more recent conceptions of alterity, including those of Lévinas and Derrida respectively? For Merleau-Ponty, the other retains their difference, as well as their capacity to shock and break open the horizons of the same, and yet there is an enduring insistence that this difference can and should be encountered by, in a paradoxical sense, the actual transformation of this difference – that is, not the ceasing to be different, but the ceasing to be absolutely different, and the breaching of the conception of self and other as discrete and unrelated entities. Merleau-Ponty's persistent implication that responsibility towards the other consists in maximising these transformational opportunities is an insightful position, although that is not to negotiate with the more difficult question of whether his way of treating alterity is more or less productive than the deconstructive one exemplified in the work of Derrida. After all, to an even greater extent than is the case with Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, deconstruction is premised upon respecting the alterity of the other.

While the philosophical projects of these two French thinkers are importantly different, this discussion of what reading another text involves for Merleau-Ponty, provides the resources for beginning a comparison on the issue of responsibility towards the alterity of the text, as well as for pre-emptively exploring some important questions that will guide this thesis' forthcoming discussions of Derridean alterity. After all, just as Merleau-Ponty emphasises the necessity of both sedimented and fertile languages, the various strategies that deconstruction implements in order to respect textual alterity are also premised upon two fundamental moves of what might be termed 'sameness' and 'difference' at once. That is, deconstruction is committed to the rigorous analysis of the literal meaning of a text, and yet also to finding within that meaning (perhaps in the

neglected corners) aporias that point towards alternative meanings. Deconstruction must establish a methodology that pays close attention to these apparently contradictory imperatives and a reading of any Derridean text can only reaffirm this dual aspect.

For example, in his discussion of the work of Lévinas in "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida speaks of the first aspect of this deconstructive strategy as being akin to a fidelity and a "desire to be faithful to the themes and audacities of a thinking" (WD 84). At the same time, however, deconstruction also famously borrows from Heidegger's conception of a destructive retrieve, and hence seeks to open a particular text up to alternative and usually repressed meanings that reside at least partly outside of the metaphysical tradition (although always also surreptitiously betrothed to it). Indeed, despite his avowed affinities with the philosophy of Lévinas, which will be examined in the following chapter, "Violence and Metaphysics" also contains a powerful, although subtle critique of Lévinas' early philosophy and its residual humanism (WD 127). Moreover, at least according to Simon Critchley, Derrida's criticisms induced some substantial changes in Lévinas' subsequent texts[240]. This more violent and transgressive aspect of deconstruction is amply illustrated by Derrida's consistent and Nietzschean-inspired exhortation, aimed at all of us engaged in philosophy, to "invent in your own language if you can or want to hear mine; invent if you can or want to give my language to be understood" (MO 57). In suggesting that a faithful reading of him is one that transgresses and goes beyond him, Derrida installs invention and reappropriation as vitally important aspects of any deconstructive reading. Ultimately, the merit of a deconstructive reading consists in this creative contact with another text that cannot be characterised as either mere fidelity or as an absolute transgression, but rather which oscillates between these dual demands.

The intriguing thing about deconstruction, however, is that despite the fact that Derrida's own interpretations of specific texts are generally quite radical, it is often difficult to pinpoint where the explanatory exegesis of a text ends and where the more violent and transgressive aspect of deconstruction begins. In the transformative interaction that ensues on account of deconstruction's dual commitments to both fidelity and transgression, Derrida is always reluctant to impose 'my text', 'your text' designations too conspicuously in his texts. Returning to the problematic that has been associated with Merleau-Ponty, one might even suggest that self and other are extremely

difficult to discern in the work of deconstruction. It is even problematic to speak of a 'work' of deconstruction, since deconstruction itself (were such a singularity ever attributable to it) only highlights what was already revealed in the text itself, and this all the more pointedly since Paul de Man's insistence upon Rousseau's own 'deconstructive' capacity. All of the elements of a deconstructive intervention reside in the "neglected cornerstones" of an already existing system (MDM 72), and this equation is not altered in any significant way whether that 'system' be conceived of as metaphysics generally, which must contain its non-metaphysical track, or the writings of a specific thinker, which must also always testify to that which they are attempting to exclude. What then, is the 'work' of deconstruction, if there is "always already" (MDM 73) deconstruction taking place? These are, of course, themes reflected upon at length by Derrida (and they will also be examined in the final two chapters), but another obvious and analogous question is: who or what is deconstructing, and where does the pressure exerted upon the deconstructive lever derive from, given that notions like self and other are so importantly undecidable?

It is worth emphasising that these are not simply rhetorical questions designed to denigrate deconstruction, since such a position is rather closely related to that which Merleau-Ponty has just been commended for – ie. his insistence that categories like self and other must be transformed in order to do justice to, and act responsibly towards the alterity of the other. It might even be suggested that a 'proper' deconstructive reading (which is also always a writing) and by implication a responsible treatment of alterity, would consist in an interpretation that is open to the otherness of the text and yet which does not simply reify that otherness, but transforms it into something different, as Merleau-Ponty has also insisted in *The Prose of the World*. A reification of alterity – which might involve: a) either ceaselessly quoting and/or seeking to present nothing but an exegesis; or b) refusing to interact with the text in any concrete ways but nevertheless idolatrously preserving it as an inspiration – is not something that could be associated with the deconstructive reading of a text (cf. MDM 50). On the contrary, in responding to the alterity of another text, both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty acknowledge the dual necessity of sterile and fertile language, of fidelity and transgression. Despite being preoccupied with such seemingly disparate themes, both of these French philosophers are intent on encouraging a transformational attitude towards alterity that complicates any

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[240]Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p 11–12.

dualistic conception of self and other.

The realisation of these type of similarities on the question of alterity – which are only initial and peremptory formulations that await further examination – immediately provokes several important questions regarding the relationship between these two thinkers. In particular, the extent to which Derrida's conception of alterity remains intent on problematising self and other categories, and encouraging a recognition of their transformational aspects, will be an important issue. After all, in attempting to make room for the possibility of difference and heterogeneity, Derrida suggests that deconstruction aims specifically to accomplish two main things: that is, the reversal of the previously prioritised term of the opposition; and then to reveal how the logic that sustains and safeguards that opposition is always already disrupted (M 195). The extent to which these dual strategies are actually adhered to in practice will be a major concern, for the valorisation of only the reversal aspect of the deconstructive intervention would preclude the suggestion of Merleau-Ponty, and tacitly by Derrida himself, that otherness (whether that be a textual or humanistic other) is best encountered in the transformation of it. A mere reversal very rarely transforms the structure and imperatives involved in a given opposition, and it is with such thoughts in mind that we must turn to an analysis of Derrida's later texts, paying particular attention to his preoccupation with themes like the messianic, his call to the wholly other "to come", his consistent affirmation of a "radical singularity", as well as his "possible-impossible" aporias more generally. All of these themes *appear* inclined towards exalting a rather more absolute and asymmetrical conception of alterity than that endorsed by Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic conception of alterity, as well as towards promoting a disjunction between self and other that might, at least to some extent, prohibit their transformative interaction.

9. The Other of Derridean Deconstruction: Lévinas, Phenomenology, and the Problem of Responsibility

Deconstruction, and postmodernism more generally, have both associated their various criticisms of the philosophical tradition with a desire to emancipate a conception of alterity that they see as marginalised by metaphysics. This chapter does not intend either to validate or to cast aspersions upon postmodernity, but it does intend to form some qualitative judgements regarding this pivotal aspect of Derrida's deconstructive enterprise. In examining his treatment of alterity, it is necessary to explore an aporia that is discernible in many of Derrida's writings: that is, the tension his work often bears between emphasising an absolute and irrecuperable alterity that is always deferred and always "to come", and his simultaneous insistence that the other is always already within the self – a conception of alterity that can be summed up most presciently as always already encroaching. These two aspects of his treatment of alterity do not necessarily contradict one another, but they do exist in some tension with one another, and it will be argued that this problem is symptomatic of Derrida's vacillation between a Lévinasian-inspired conception of alterity and a more traditionally phenomenological conception of the other. In unpacking this important tension, this chapter will examine *The Gift of Death*'s meandering ruminations on what responsibility to the alterity of the other might consist in, and it will also consider Derrida's persistent emphasis upon what he refers to as the messianic aspects of alterity.

In order to disclose the full ramifications of the problem that is being addressed, it is worth reaffirming that the phenomenological treatment of the other has been disparaged by a multitude of thinkers for subscribing to the "imperialism of the same"[241]. The suggestion propounded by Lévinas, among others, is that the phenomenological conception of the other – and this is intended to apply to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, as much as to Husserl – actually deprives the other of exactly that which would constitute their alterity. According to this interpretation, phenomenology invariably describes the other along the lines of what subjectivity knows of it (or at least thinks it knows). While there are good reasons to retain a healthy scepticism in regard to this schematic dismissal of phenomenology (particularly in relation to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty), it is not overly surprising, and nor is it simply wrong. At least in its stated methodological intent,

the phenomenological reduction is an attempt to bracket away the 'natural attitude' that assumes that there is an outside world, and to instead restrict itself to a description of the contents of consciousness (PP viii, ix)[242]. As a consequence of this theoretical starting point, it would *seem* that alterity can only be analysed according to how it appears to consciousness, and is hence defined only in terms of what it is for the self. For Lévinas, on the contrary, the other is precisely the opposite to this, being primarily that which resists knowledge, as well as every attempt to thematise or capture that alterity. The other is that which does not and cannot appear. It will be argued that Derrida's conception of alterity vacillates between these two positions: ie. between a phenomenology that, while perhaps not an imperialism of the same, certainly emphasises the way in which the self always encroaches upon the other, and a more Lévinasian-influenced conception of alterity which, to some extent, downplays this recognition. In this respect, Derrida's work stages a battle between phenomenology and something tantamount to a post-phenomenology (a conception of alterity that is irrecuperable and beyond the dialectic), and in addressing this problem this chapter promises to offer some important insights into the question of responsibility towards the other.

A tension between these two aspects of alterity is evident in much of Derrida's work, but it is also apparent in his explicit interactions with the philosophy of Lévinas. It has been widely recognised that Derrida owes Lévinas a considerable philosophical debt, and at times Derrida implies that his conception of alterity is similarly absolute and irrecuperable; the other is that which by definition must elude any attempt to grasp it. Like Lévinas, Derrida claims that the other precedes philosophy and "necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin" (AL 299), and he also describes his work as "a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons, motivates it"[243]. Without going into unnecessary detail at this formative stage of this chapter, Derrida clearly endorses some aspects of Lévinas' rather unsympathetic interpretation of traditional phenomenology, as well as his more general desire to accord alterity a less derivative role in his philosophy (or non-philosophy[244]). It might be

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[241]Lévinas, E., "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", p 50–5.
[242]Also see Husserl, E., *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, chapter five.
[243]Derrida, J., "Deconstruction and the Other: Dialogue with Derrida", p 118.
[244]In "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida suggests that because of his renunciation of *apriori's* and transcendental horizons of language, Lévinas' work amounts to an empiricism. According to Derrida, it is "a pure thought of pure difference", that strictly speaking no longer partakes in philosophy (WD 151).

reasonably suggested that Derrida's enduring suspicions regarding phenomenology, in conjunction with his declared empathy with Lévinas' philosophical project, provide enough circumstantial evidence to indicate that his account of alterity would be importantly different to the phenomenological paradigm that Lévinas castigates (including the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, whose work will be considered shortly). Nor is it that such a position is simply incorrect.

Before sliding too quickly down this post-structuralist versus phenomenologist path, however, it is worth complicating such an account by pointing out that despite his avowed affinities with Lévinas' way of thinking[245], in other places Derrida is suspicious of Lévinas' position, and even of aspects of his own formulations that resemble Lévinas' work. It should not be ignored that Derrida has frequently returned to the writings of Lévinas and intermingled his appreciation for him with multifarious criticisms. In no particular order, Lévinas has been accused of humanism (WD 114, 127), of remaining within the tradition of Western metaphysics while claiming otherwise (WD 126), of betraying the feminine (AEL), of trying but failing to distinguish between the religious and the ethical (GD 84)[246], and of misguided and inaccurate readings of Heidegger (WD 135–8, cf. GD 42) and Husserl (WD 120–21). Undoubtedly, there are also other issues with which Derrida's deconstructive interventions have been concerned, but for the moment it suffices to recognise that all of these apparently disparate criticisms relate to Lévinas' fundamental conception of alterity. For this reason, it is worth momentarily returning to the vast and complicated text that is "Violence and Metaphysics", in which Derrida first sets about textually articulating some of his differences from Lévinas.

In that text, Derrida seeks to reveal that rather than the other being infinite and absolute, as Lévinas demands, the other must also be recognisable as "*other than myself*". The notion of alterity, Derrida argues, requires this relational aspect (being other than myself) to be conceivable at all (WD 126). Suggesting that dissymmetry would be

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[245]Derrida describes the fundamental nature of his relationship with Lévinas thus: "Faced with a thinking like that of Lévinas, I never have an objection. I am ready to subscribe to everything that he says. That does not mean that I think the same thing in the same way, but in this respect the differences are very difficult to determine; in this case, what do differences of idiom, language or writing mean...these are not philosophical differences" (as cited in Critchley, S., p 9–10). Their relationship, however, is obviously more complicated than Derrida's rather schematic account of it suggests.

[246]In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida comments that "in taking into account absolute singularity, that is the absolute alterity obtaining in relations between one human and another, Lévinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human" (GD 84). In such sentiments, Derrida appears to suggest that while Lévinas intends to maintain a distinction between the religious and the ethical, his failure to do so is actually a good thing. For Derrida, there can be no neat demarcation

impossible without some form of symmetry (WD 126), Derrida is wary of imbuing alterity with the absolute qualities that are involved in the singularity of Lévinas' face-to-face encounter. It is also worth acknowledging that, according to Derrida, Lévinas' position partly betrays itself, because the wholly other is absolutely other only if it is human and hence partly the same (WD 127). While Derrida is convinced that his own work avoids this residual humanism, in insisting that alterity must be "other than the self" (and is hence conceivable only in relation to the self) he tacitly acknowledges a *minimal* truth to what Lévinas has denigrated as the phenomenological "imperialism of the same" – ie. the notion that the other is always being conditioned by the horizons and contexts that the subject brings to bear upon that alterity. This is one example, among others, of the distance that Derrida establishes between his own work and that of Lévinas. It is also evidence that Derrida's debt to his deconstructive predecessor is not enough, on its own, to justify an oppositional logic when considering his relationship to the phenomenological conception of alterity, and to the work of Merleau-Ponty.

More needs to be said about Derrida's relationship to Lévinas, but this summary of one of the main arguments of "Violence and Metaphysics" is sufficient to show that although a conception of radical alterity might well be privileged by Derrida, at least according to his specific interactions with the work of Lévinas, it is not valorised to the same extent. Of the two, Derrida *seems* to be the more receptive to what might be called the traditional phenomenological perspective[247], and if this is sustained in his later writings on alterity then this would also bring the Derridean position closer to Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity.

Of course, it is also possible that despite his protestations to the contrary, Derrida's conception of alterity in his later work nevertheless inclines towards the position that is best exemplified by Lévinas (and both John Caputo and Simon Critchley implicitly claim this in relation to the messianic[248]). If that is the case, then some of Derrida's early criticisms of Lévinas would also appear to be self-criticisms. Without pre-empting our ultimate verdict, it will be claimed that there is a tension in Derrida's later work between a Lévinasian-inclined description of alterity and a more relational or

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between the religious and the ethical.

[247]In this respect, it is not surprising that in "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida rescues Husserl's notion of the alter-ego from some of Lévinas' more severe criticisms of it (WD 120–1).

[248]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 83–4. Simon Critchley also stresses the proximity of Lévinas and Derrida, even if he ultimately seems to prefer the Lévinasian account (see Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p 199–200).

traditionally phenomenological conception of alterity, although some of the details of both of these positions are still to be filled in.

Before delving into the paradoxes of Derrida's later philosophy, it is worth recognising that the questions that concern this chapter can be situated in terms of his own deconstructive methodology, and this is one reason why the early chapters of this thesis considered *Of Grammatology* at such length. Even if one wants to suggest, as Gasché has, that deconstruction is, in part, the deconstruction of the concept of method (cf. MDM 122–4)[249], it nevertheless has a distinguishable strategy that Derrida has made explicit (M 195). Particularly in his early texts, Derrida describes deconstruction as proceeding according to two main strategies: the first, the reversal or inversion of the prioritised term of a metaphysical opposition; and the second, the displacement or disruption of that opposition, by revealing that it is already corrupted from within. A genuinely deconstructive intervention requires both of these aspects in relatively equal measure. These dual ambitions have been explicated in detail in chapter three, but for the moment it suffices to recognise that Derrida's vacillation on the question of alterity can be cogently seen to derive from these dual methodological concerns and their importantly distinct, although not completely opposed, imperatives. A major issue for this chapter is the extent to which Derrida satisfies himself with simply reversing the alleged priority of the self in the phenomenological conception of alterity, for a philosophy that emphasises how the other does not and cannot appear. Theoretically, at least, deconstruction must also succeed in disrupting this self-other opposition, rather than merely reversing it, for it is this aspect of his methodology that Derrida acknowledges is the important one and this is because of an enduring suspicion about the mere reversal of binary oppositions. One inhabits such oppositions all the more when one does not suspect it (OG 24), and to attempt to reverse an opposition, or to just step outside of metaphysics, does not necessarily challenge the framework and governing presuppositions that are attempting to be reversed[250]. In the example that concerns us, to merely reverse the conception of the self as determinative of the qualities of alterity (as phenomenology is accused of) for a

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[249]Gasché, R., *The Tain of the Mirror*, p 123.

[250]According to Caputo, the way to negotiate the paradox of the gift (and it is a paradox analogous with that which ensures that one cannot just step outside of metaphysics) is to move within the cycles of giving and taking, but also to attempt to outmanoeuvre them by somehow loosening this type of exchange to allow for the possibility of something different (see Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 170–1). While this formulation poses as many questions as it answers, this type of problem will be more explicitly dealt with in the following chapter.

notion of alterity as absolutely indeterminable and capable of being accorded no tangible qualities, might be to leave in place a discrete separation between self and other that retains a propensity towards a type of individualism and a conception of subjectivity that has long since been disparaged[251]. Having sketched such a framework for this chapter, it is time that this analysis became a little more specific.

The most obvious aspect of Derrida's later philosophical conception of alterity is his advocation of the *tout autre*, the wholly other, and *The Gift of Death* will be our main focus in explicating what this exaltation of the wholly other might mean. Focusing upon Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of the supreme Abrahamic sacrifice upon Mount Moriah, the latter half of this text promises to be of benefit in understanding Derrida's evocation of the wholly other, and also, albeit less directly, in beginning to comprehend his emphasis upon the messianic qualities of alterity[252]. This text also looms as important for this thesis' more general purposes. As an essay on "the secrets of European responsibility" (GD 1) it will enable some tacit comparative allusions to the notion of responsibility as demanding a transformative interaction between self and other that the previous chapter attributed to Merleau-Ponty.

Any attempt to sum up this short but ominously difficult text would have to involve the recognition of a certain incommensurability between the individual and the universal (or the singular and the multiple, although these are not quite synonymous), and consequently the dual demands placed upon anybody intending to behave responsibly. For Derrida, the paradox of responsible behaviour both installs a self-other opposition, in that there is always a question of being responsible before a singular other (eg. a loved one, God, etc.), and yet it also breaks down the intimacy of this self-other opposition by referring us to our responsibility towards others generally and to what we share with them. Derrida insists that this type of aporia is too often ignored by the "knights of responsibility" who presume a rationalistic discourse of intention, conscience and good will (cf. MDM 247), such that accountability and responsibility in all aspects of life – whether that be guilt before the human law, or even before the divine will of God – is

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[251]Christina Howells argues that Derrida's conception of subjectivity, at least in his early work, remains stuck in what she calls "the reversing phase" rather than being radically deconstructed (see Howells, C., *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999). In some respects, I will accuse his later work of this fault, although it will be admitted that Derrida's conception of alterity does not only remain within the 'reversing stage'.

[252]Although Derrida does not explicitly refer to this distinction between the messianic and messianisms in *The Gift of Death* (it is, however, a feature of *Spectres of Marx*), such a distinction is nevertheless

quite easily established (GD 85). These are the same people who insist that concrete ethical guidelines should be provided by any philosopher worth his or her 'salt' (GD 67) and who repeatedly ignore the difficulties inherent in a notion like responsibility, which demands something importantly different from merely behaving dutifully (GD 63).

Derrida's exploration of Abraham's strange and paradoxical responsibility before the demands of God, which consists most obviously in sacrificing his only son Isaac, but also in betraying the ethical order through his silence about this act (GD 57–60), is designed to problematise this type of ethical concern that exclusively locates responsibility in the realm of generality. In places, Derrida even verges on suggesting that this more common notion of responsibility, which insists that one should behave according to a general principle that is capable of being rationally validated and justified in the public realm (GD 60), should be replaced with something closer to an Abrahamian individuality where the demands of a singular other (eg. God) are importantly distinct from the ethical demands of our society (GD 61, 66). It should be noted that this emphasis upon responsibility as involving a radical singular confrontation with something or someone wholly other, seems to bear some similarities to the Lévinasian conception of alterity and the radical singularity upon which his face-to-face encounter is predicated. This cannot be justified as yet, but it is also important to recognise that, ostensibly at least, Derrida equivocates regarding just how far he wants to endorse such a conception of responsibility and also on the entire issue of whether Abraham's willingness to murder is an act of faith, or simply an unforgivable transgression.

Derrida's methodology here, this undecidable equivocation, might also be termed an 'agnosticism'. This is obviously a somewhat paradoxical thought given the quasi-religious themes with which this chapter is concerned, but such an assertion does not necessarily contradict the arguments of philosophers like Caputo, as well as Kevin Hart, who have both highlighted the 'religious' significance of Derrida's thought[253]. For Derrida, responsibility to the other is such that we cannot know whether we have, or have not, made a mistake by them. In deciding, we endure the trial of undecidability, which ensures that there is no right answer, since the decision is that which must leap into the

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presupposed in places as this chapter will illustrate.

[253]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, & Hart, K., *Trespass of the Sign*. It will soon be argued that Derrida makes a religion of agnosticism (and that is what Caputo's "religion without religion" amounts to), but before elaborating on such ideas consideration of Derrida's notion of the messianic is required.

unknown and into madness, according to both Kierkegaard and Derrida alike (GD 65). But textually speaking, it is worth noting that Derrida does not actually descend into this madness very often. He refuses to say 'yes' or 'no' to the question of whether Abraham is the person of greatest faith. Abraham is "at the same time, the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible" (GD 72). In this respect, it is worth momentarily invoking William James' famous definition of the agnostic. In his reliance upon such equivocations, Derrida appears to take the risk of being wrong more seriously than the risks of missing out on the spiritual benefits of belief (that is, of deciding)[254], and he leaves his options open. This, of course, is a defining trait of deconstruction, which has been variously pilloried and praised for this refusal to propound anything that the logocentric tradition could deem to be a thesis. In this respect, it is also not surprising that Simon Critchley has described Derrida's work as a "philosophy of hesitation"[255].

Of course, to point out this type of agnosticism and equivocation is not necessarily to criticise Derrida. Who can blame him for not finding a formulaic response to the question of responsibility towards the other? This thesis will not be able to provide it, even though it will be suggested that an alternative and possibly more promising way to conceive of this responsibility is one that is more intimately acquainted with the position of Merleau-Ponty. But before entertaining any criticisms of Derrida, it must be recognised that this particular type of undecidability – which is sometimes expressed via an insistence upon the "perhaps" (PF 38)[256] – is typical of deconstruction, and there is also an analogous problem in his recently published text, *Of Hospitality*.

Towards the end of this text, Derrida returns to biblical themes and considers the famous story of Lot. The story revolves around some foreign men arriving at Lot's doorstep and asking to be taken in. Lot agrees, but when some other men from Sodom arrive at his house and violently demand those foreigners whom he has taken in under his protection, Lot refuses. After first offering them his daughter, Lot eventually decides to sacrifice his wife to the sexual whims of the men from Sodom rather than give up his

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[254]In his essay "The Will to Believe", William James suggests that the agnostic's position – a refusal to commit oneself to faith because of insufficient evidence – is untenable. He sees it as being a position of "pure intellectualism". See James, W., *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Longmans, Green, 1896.

[255]Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p 41.

[256]In the context of a discussion of Nietzsche in *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida asserts that "no responsibility will ever abolish the perhaps" (PF 38), and he even suggests, in his own ambiguous way,

duty to be hospitable to his recently arrived guests (OH 151–5). Derrida concludes this text, as well as this particular discussion of hospitality and what it might involve, by asking: "Are we the heirs to this tradition of hospitality? Up to what point? Where should we place the invariant, if it is one, across this logic and these narratives?" (OH 155). These are all pertinent questions, but they are also questions that are notoriously difficult to figure out in Derrida's texts, where there is never an obvious answer and where self and other designations (eg. where the exegesis ends, and the deconstruction begins) are few and far between.

Nevertheless, it is relatively clear that in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida intends to free us from the common assumption that responsibility is to be associated with behaviour that accords with general principles capable of justification in the public realm. In opposition to such an account, he emphasises the "radical singularity" of the demands placed upon Abraham by God (GD 60, 68, 79) and those that might be placed on us by our own loved ones. In the process, he also verges on reinstalling a self-other binarism. While such a suggestion runs against the grain of much of what Derrida says about alterity, particularly in his early work, it is worth recognising that the aporia that surrounds Abraham's decision presumes a rather discrete self and other. Abraham is estranged from God (even if God is within, he is nevertheless importantly distinct), aware only that he is compelled to sacrifice his son, and he has no access to the rationale behind the necessity for such a sacrifice and no possibility of a conversation with God, or a plea bargain, that might lead to respite from this most horrible of commandments. Equally importantly, Abraham's family are also other radically disparate individuals, entirely estranged from Abraham and his predicament (GD 73). His wife Sarah is she to whom nothing is ever said (GD 76). This is not to suggest that Abraham has no feelings for them – he certainly does and this is what imbues the sacrifice with worth (GD 65). But the point is that Abraham is envisaged as making a decision in a vacuum from the rest of existence. How is that possible? Abraham does not come, or even exist without his family, and it is difficult to conceive of a radically singular conversation between the essence of Abraham, his interior reserve, and God. Admittedly, it is not always transparently clear that Derrida endorses this interior reserve of subjectivity that Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham reveals. However, both Kierkegaard and Derrida repeatedly insist upon the importance of this radical singularity in behaving responsibly

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that responsibility might consist precisely in framing all of our responses in terms of a 'perhaps'.

and in deciding upon a course of action (GD 60, 68, 79, 87).

What exactly is this radical singularity that Derrida keeps referring to in this text, as well as in others from the same period[257], including *Politics of Friendship*, where he also refers to an "absolutely and irreplaceably singular responsibility" (PF 37)? In what does this radical singularity of the other, and by implication ourselves, consist? In this respect, it is worth recalling Derrida's insistence that a decision, if it is genuinely to be a decision, must create a rupture with all prior preparations or anticipations for that decision (GD 77). A decision must leap beyond any mere calculative reasoning and anticipatory modes of figuring out what might be the best course of action. Now, if a decision cannot follow from any prior preparations, or from any particularly salient advice, or even simply from one's lifelong commitment to family or religion, then it would seem that one is importantly alone when deciding and we can hence understand Derrida's insistence upon a radical and absolute singularity. Indeed, Derrida suggests that this radical singularity is illustrated equally well in two main phenomena, those being death and the decision, as no-one can die or decide in place of me (GD 60). That said, Derrida also has some substantial reservations in regard to the Heideggerian conception of death as the ultimate individualising event[258], but further consideration of his treatment of death must wait until the next chapter.

Derrida's emphasis upon this radical singularity seems to be referring to the solitude that responsibility brings with it, and in this respect it is worth noting that he has elsewhere made some revealing comments about the solitude that deconstruction presupposes. In a relatively recent interview, one speaker asked Derrida if *différance* is analogous to what in contemporary literature is called solitude and his response was highly intriguing. Derrida replied that:

> The notion of solitude obeys a highly disconcerting logic. Pure solitude is absolute non-solitude, whether it cuts off all relation to the other or whether it relates to all that is other, which is also not relating at all. Is not the relation to every other, which is the only opening to a possible solitude, also the interruption to solitude?[259]

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[257]In the interviews contained in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, Derrida also repeatedly refers to this radical singularity. See Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 14.
[258]This is examined in greater depth in Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 83.
[259]Derrida, J., as cited in "The Original Discussion of *Différance*", *Derrida and Différance*, eds. Wood & Bernasconi, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, p 85.

Merleau-Ponty has suggested that solitude and communication are but two moments of the same phenomenon (PP 359, VI 79, 233), and at least in this moment, Derrida similarly insists that solitude is a relational concept. As a consequence, he is also a considerable distance from affirming only the pure and unconditional alterity of the other. Nevertheless, Derrida does go on to suggest that "I do not absolutely reject the proposition according to which *différance* would also be solitude"[260]. This is an important admission, for even where Derrida recognises that it must be balanced by its counterpart, it is solitude and disruption that remains his focus. Of course, an emphasis upon solitude does not necessarily preclude a meaningful conception of alterity. It might be suggested that it is the change to the 'I', and one's own constant displacement that is alterity.

Indeed, in Derrida's discussion of the decision in *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, he repeatedly argues that if a person decides on a course of action based only on their own ego and what they are capable of, then it is not a decision (AEL 23). A decision must reach beyond what he describes as the "autonomic" and "egological" resources of a self-contained individual (AEL 24), and towards an unknown future. What then becomes of this notion of a radical singularity, if a "theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision" (PF 68)? It clearly still refers to a being alone with the decision, but this does not mean that one can decide simply on the basis of one's own propensity for doing things in a certain way. That is not a decision either. The decision, which installs one as radically singular, should also come from something other and even something "unconscious", as has been discussed in chapter six (cf. PF 69). Radical singularity is, paradoxically, where one is best open to alterity. A typical Derridean formulation might be that the only possible decision, is this impossible decision by order of the other whose alterity must somehow be within me, and yet I am nevertheless responsible for this decision that exceeds my being (eg. Abraham's sacrifice of his son for, and by order of, God). The roles of self and other are inextricably intertwined in such ideas, and so it is not, in the end, a binarism of self and other that this chapter is accusing Derrida of, despite this radical singularity that obtains between God and Abraham, and that makes all other considerations superfluous.

It is necessary to return to *The Gift of Death* in a little more detail to see what can be made of this equivocation that has been discerned. Although Derrida emphasises the Kierkegaardian and Abrahamian affirmation of an absolutely singular responsibility

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[260]Derrida, J., as cited in "The Original Discussion of *Différance*", *Derrida and Différance*, p 86.

before the wholly other (*tout autre*), as yet it has not been made clear how this balances with his more general intent to expose that we all have competing claims upon us and to highlight that there is no easy way to address the question of responsibility. In exploring the paradoxical status of responsibility, Derrida observes that:

> As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all of the others (GD 68).

Moreover, he suggests that in this "land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day" (GD 69), we betray and offer gifts of death to those most intimate to us, just as Abraham so dramatically did to his family and son. Ethics, with its dependence upon generality, must be continually sacrificed as an inevitable aspect of the human condition and its aporetic demand to decide (GD 70). As Derrida points out, in writing about one particular cause rather than another, in pursuing one profession over another, in spending time with one's family rather than at work, one inevitably ignores the "other others" (GD 69), and this is a condition of any and every existence. He argues that "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others" (GD 68). One can only presume that, for Derrida, the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. He does, in fact, suggest that a universal community that excludes no one is a contradiction in terms. According to him, this is because:

> I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it... What binds me to this one or that one, remains finally unjustifiable (GD 70).

Derrida hence implies that responsibility to any particular individual is only possible by being irresponsible to the "other others", that is, to the other people and possibilities that haunt any and every existence. Moreover, no choice can be justified, because every other is wholly other (GD 71), as other to us as the next person. The meaning of this enigmatic formulation will be pursued shortly, but for the moment it is clear that responsibility towards the other involves both disclosure and secrecy, both an ethical demand for generality and a simultaneous compulsion towards radical singularity. Balancing these two competing claims is envisaged to be inordinately difficult. Derrida suggests only that

a responsible appreciation of aporia requires a respect both for the universal and the particular[261], and he hence implies that a responsible treatment of alterity should involve trying to keep the recognition of both of these 'truths' together.

However, presuming that we have appreciated the aporia that envelops responsibility and the decision, one enduring question still remains and that is "what is to be done?". In this respect, Derrida is not an ethicist and will not dictate any guidelines for the decision, except that enduring the trial of undecidability (LI 210) should not be avoided. Typically, he will also restate the aporia that surrounds responsibility in the form of an aphorism, and one that has intrigued and repelled commentators in perhaps equal measure.

The aphorism that he coins to express this paradoxical confrontation between the general and the ethical in attempting to behave responsibly is *tout autre est tout autre*, which translates as the tautologous sentiment that every other is every other. Derrida alters this to decree that "every other (one) is every (bit) other", although he warns us against abusing this aphorism as the secret of all secrets and admits that it readily betrays his purpose (GD 82–3). It might be interjected that aphorisms, and neologisms that work aphoristically, are the staple diet of deconstruction in all of its various guises, but Derrida's assertion that every other is wholly other does manage to convey much of the import of *The Gift of Death*'s discussions regarding the aporia of responsibility. It performatively introduces a tension between singularity and generality, in that every other is wholly other, inaccessible even, and yet this must apply to every single other in a general sense (GD 87). As Geoffrey Bennington has pertinently put it, Derrida's aphorism reveals that "the principle whereby the very (irreplaceable) singularity of the other (the principle of its difference) is thinkable only in the context of that singularity's potential equalisation with every other singularity (the principle of its indifference)"[262].

Of course, certain questions still abound, including exactly what Derrida is referring to through this recourse to conceptions of the "wholly other". His point seems to be that the infinite alterity and transcendence exemplified by God (GD 27, 33) is typical of our relations with every other (GD 78), and that there is hence a sense that, like Abraham, we all have pacts with people that we can never really know, and we can never

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[261]Speaking to Caputo at the Villanova Roundtable Conference, Derrida makes explicit that "I would not oppose, as you did, universality and singularity. I would try to keep the two together" (See Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 22).

[262]Bennington, G., *Interrupting Derrida*, p 46.

adequately justify why the pact is with them and not somebody else. Such a position certainly throws conceptions of responsible behaviour free of the moralising assertions that are commonly betrothed to any command to behave responsibly. While this encapsulation of Derrida's project should not be taken to mean *only* that every other is perpetually incapable of being comprehended – for he readjusts his formulation throughout – such an interpretation is a reasonable enough beginning.

However, one obvious response to such a position would be to argue that if every other were wholly other, then they would not be conceivable at all, as Derrida himself pointed out to Lévinas all those years ago (WD 126). If we were not at least partially prepared for the other, then their coming would not cause a ripple and their alterity would not be appreciated. According to Caputo, the wholly other is hence wholly other only up to a point – "an absolute surprise *relative* to what we were *expecting* [*my italics*]"[263] and anticipating. The alterity of the wholly other cannot be too great, or too small, but is a shock to the system in place that modifies the same and "alters it, instead of confirming it in its complacency"[264]. This emphasis upon the relative and non-absolute aspect of alterity would seem to be closely related to the notion of surprise that some phenomenology can theorise well (the previous chapter associated Merleau-Ponty's work with the claim that alterity is that which "literally alters"). It will also become important when contrasted with other assertions that Derrida makes about our experience of the wholly other as being symptomatic of a "relationless relation". The question that concerns this chapter will become one regarding how to conceive of this relational aspect with an alterity that is wholly other, and radically singular. How can the wholly other be anticipated, as even Caputo accepts that it must be, and yet Derrida elsewhere insists that the wholly other, like the decision, is precisely that which cannot be anticipated and which must remain forever elusive?

Such questions must be postponed for the time being, as there are more complications in store for any attempt to get a grip on the Derridean other, since according to him, the wholly other can never be present. This is not quite the same thing as suggesting that the wholly other can never be encountered, since for deconstruction, the impossible, in the peculiar sense that Derrida imbues the term with, can very much be encountered. Nevertheless, the first and most obvious question is what is Derrida getting

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[263]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 22.
[264]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 24.

at by these apparently absurd questions, which like the question of Being (although he would insist in an importantly different way), seem to exceed all of our resources for attempting to answer them? Derrida thinks that the notion of the wholly other is important to all of us, and also retains a practical and everyday relevance, because in some way or another we are all perpetually waiting for something wholly other. To borrow an image of Caputo's, Derrida's point is that we persistently set a place at the table for the wholly other even if we never actually expect them to turn up. His conception of the wholly other hence does have something to do with our lives, and is always tethered to the horizon of the same[265]. The wholly other is not opposed to the other as known, and it does not simply occupy a different and more ephemeral realm, but insists that given any other that we do know, something about them must forever remain aloof and unthematisable.

But if we ask "what is the wholly other?", then we are equally missing the point. Deconstruction insists that it has no place in identifying the wholly other, for that would be to propose a theism. This brings us to a term that Derrida has resuscitated from its association with Walter Benjamin and the Judaic tradition more generally, to shed some explanatory light upon why this notion of the wholly other is relevant to all of our lives and yet why it also cannot be identified with any determinate characteristics. That term is the messianic and it relies upon a distinction with messianism. Given Derrida's mistrust of any philosophy that is not "contaminated by negative theology"[266], it is apt that this exegesis should proceed negatively and with the latter term first. It is certainly easier to explicate what the messianic is not referring to – that being a messianism – rather than precisely what it is referring to.

According to Derrida, the term messianism refers predominantly to the religions of the Messiahs – ie. the Muslim, Judaic and Christian religions. These religions proffer a Messiah of known characteristics, and often one who is expected to arrive at a particular time or place. The Messiah is inscribed in their respective religious texts and in an oral tradition that dictates that only if the other conforms to such and such a description is that person actually the Messiah. The most obvious of numerous necessary characteristics for the Messiah, it seems, is that they must invariably be male. Sexuality might seem to be a strange prerequisite to tether to that which is beyond this world, wholly other, but it is

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[265]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 69
[266]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 48 & 146.

only one of many. That said, Derrida is not simplistically disparaging religion and the messianisms they propound, and as has been previously mentioned, Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* has revealed the significance that Derrida accords to the religious experience. In an important respect, the messianic depends upon the various messianisms and Derrida admits that he cannot say which is the more originary[267]. The messianism of Abraham, for example, in his singular responsibility before God, for Derrida (although perhaps not for Kierkegaard) reveals the messianic structure of existence more generally (and vice versa), in that we all share a similar relationship to alterity even if we have not named and circumscribed that experience according to the template provided by a particular religion.

However, Derrida's call to the wholly other, his invocation for the wholly other "to come", is not a call for a fixed or identifiable other of known characteristics, as is arguably the case in the archetypal religious experience. His wholly other is indeterminable and can never actually arrive. Derrida more than once recounts a story of Blanchot's where the Messiah was actually at the gates to a city, disguised in rags. After some time, the Messiah was finally recognised by a beggar, but the beggar could think of nothing more relevant to ask than: "when will you come?"[268]. Even when the Messiah is 'there', he or she must still be yet to come, and this brings us to the distinction between the messianic and the various historical messianisms. The messianic refers predominantly to a structure of our existence that involves waiting – waiting even in activity – and a ceaseless openness towards a future that can never be circumscribed by the horizons of significance that we inevitably bring to bear upon that possible future. In other words, Derrida is not referring to a future that will one day become present, but to an openness towards an unknown futurity that is necessarily involved in what we take to be 'presence' and hence also renders it 'impossible'.

Despite his invocation of the term 'messianic' with all of its religious associations, Derrida's position verges on being an agnosticism in regard to the Messiah in that there is an obvious refusal to definitively say whether or not the Messiah will ever come. This type of question is bracketed away, in favour of pointing out that the wholly other must always be a surprise and that it hence makes no real sense to imbue the messianic with determinate qualities, because the surprise is precisely that which resists

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[267]Derrida, J., as cited in Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 24.
[268]Derrida, J., as cited in Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 24.

expectations (although it also tacitly depends upon expectations, as shall become apparent).

Derrida's notion of the messianic also contains a more psychological register, in that he argues that while we persistently hope for the arrival of the wholly other, there is also a sense in which we do not actually want the Messiah to turn up. The prospect scares us, and we harbour a desire for the coming of the Messiah to be indefinitely postponed. As Derrida has suggested, "we wait for something that we would not like to wait for"[269], and like Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, this suggests that the wait for something unknown (the wholly other, the future) is our predominant mode of being. Indeed, the wait to encounter Derrida's *tout autre* seems destined to be just as unfulfilled as that which preoccupies Vladimir and Estragon[270]. The messianic is a general structure in which the "to come" is absolutely undetermined and deferred, although the responsibilities assigned by the messianic are nevertheless here and now. Just because Godot is not actually going to turn up, does not mean that Vladimir and Estragon can, or should, simply give up their impassioned wait.

However, it is also worth observing that in another of his recent texts, Derrida enigmatically suggests that this type of messianic structure refers to:

> *A sort of relationship without relation*, with one guarding itself from the other, in *the waiting without horizon*, for a language that only knows how to keep people waiting. That is all it knows how to do, to keep people waiting, and that it is all I know about it (*my italics*, MO 71).

This thematic of the "relationship without relation", which Derrida also uses in *The Gift of Death* to describe the asymmetrical relation that obtains with something absolutely transcendent (GD 72–3), refers to Blanchot, and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, again to Lévinas, who have both used similar formulations in describing alterity. Moreover, as Derrida himself implies in suggesting that this relationship without relation refers to a "waiting without horizon", such a position involves a denial of the phenomenological insistence upon horizons of significance, as well as its tacit suggestion that the other is inevitably conditioned, and some might say curtailed, by the tools and experiences that we bring to bear upon any attempt to appreciate alterity (eg. the

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[269]Derrida, J., as cited in Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 25.
[270]Beckett, S., *Waiting for Godot*, London: Faber & Faber, 1956.

forestructures of our understanding)[271]. The problem with this, however, is that the notion of the messianic has been primarily associated with the notion of a surprise. It has also been established that the surprise cannot but be relative to our expectations, and this suggests that the wholly other cannot actually be absolutely other, for if it were, it would not be conceivable as a surprise. Formulations of Derrida's like "waiting without horizon" and "relationless relation" tend towards denying this more phenomenological and relative aspect of alterity, and yet both the notion of the messianic and the wholly other (which his above formulations are attempting to describe) are inconceivable without some recognition of the "imperialism of the same" – that is, of the ways in which alterity is never absolute but is always conditioned and even partially prefigured by the forestructures of our understanding. It seems that Derrida cannot do away with phenomenology as easily as his later work sometimes seems to presume.

It is worth digressing to reaffirm that these related notions of the messianic and the wholly other are not merely isolated aspects of his conception of alterity, or simply unimportant rhetorical devices. Derrida's emphasis upon the messianic aspects of alterity that elude any attempt to grasp them – which contains an implicit treatise on how to treat alterity responsibly: ie. messianically, rather than via a messianism that attempts to imbue the other with a certain concrete exigency – are part of his larger deconstructive enterprise that insists upon the radical singularity that constitutes such an important part of responsibility and that also emphasises the solitude of the deconstructive thinker.

In this respect, it seems that Derrida's conception of alterity, particularly in regard to his later philosophy, actually bears an increased proximity to the work of Lévinas. This radical otherness, and the singularity of this otherness of which Derrida speaks, return us to a Lévinasian account of the radical singularity involved in the face-to-face confrontation. Even though Derrida has again criticised aspects of Lévinas' position in *The Gift of Death* (cf. GD 84), this same text ultimately privileges responsibility conceived of in terms of a demand that the wholly other has made upon a singular person, and pays less attention to the ways in which this very personhood and identity of the 'I' can never be extricated from the communal society and responsibilities in which it partakes. What has happened to the Derrida who relativised the Lévinasian conception of

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[271] In *Being and Time*, Heidegger has famously emphasised the forestructures of our understanding and illustrated that all interpretation must be grounded in something that we see in advance. In some sense, we must know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking. See Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, Sections 188–192.

alterity in "Violence and Metaphysics", and who supported Husserl's notion of the alter-ego against Lévinas' rather aggressive criticisms of it (WD 120–1)? Derrida now propounds a position that is closely related to Lévinas, and it seems that some of Derrida's earlier criticisms of Lévinas are, in fact, relevant to his own increasingly prophetic concerns. At the very least, it is apparent that he cannot easily rid his conception of alterity of its more relational and phenomenological implications – that is, of the way in which something that is other, even wholly other, must always still be conceivable as "other than the self" (cf. WD 126).

But what does Derrida's apparent rejection of these phenomenological horizons, at least as they apply to the *tout autre*, entail? If the wholly other is never simply present as Derrida repeatedly insists, there is a political significance to this – that being a denial of fundamentalisms of all sorts, for any claim to a privileged access to the sovereign words or intent of the Messiah is immediately looked upon with suspicion. According to Caputo, the exaltation of the wholly other releases a politics of the singularity of the other and a respect for this singularity[272], and there is something valuable about this. After all, there is an irreducibility of the other to the self, which is equally pertinently described as a messianic openness to the future. However, the important question is whether responsibility consists in paying due attention to the aspects of the other that resist any transformative interaction with the self (eg. the radically singular encounter between Abraham and God), or to the ways in which the self inevitably overlaps with that which is other. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida acknowledges this second aspect of alterity, but is it accorded its due importance? His treatment of the other seems to place an inordinate amount of importance upon the singularity of the individual, and does not always recognise the ways in which that singularity is itself a product of others and is intertwined with the world in a way that renders any easy distinction between self and other tenuous. This is immensely paradoxical since Derrida's thought, and particularly his early thought, sought the exact opposite: ie. to banish reference to an individual subjectivity (but not to deny that it exists) and to suggest that to the extent that the effects of subjectivity are undeniable, they remain a product of the play of *différance* (SP 82).

It seems that there is an unequal tension in his later work between a privileged conception of responsibility as involving respect for the radical singularity of the wholly other, and a conception of alterity that acknowledges the importance of the relation, in

that the wholly other must be an other that is at least partially relative to ourselves (WD 126) and to what we have experienced and anticipated. Can these apparently incompatible thoughts be reconciled? Perhaps not, as Derrida very rarely wants to get rid of aporias, but to accord them their due import. Deconstructive epistemology privileges a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" response to such questions, and his philosophy is not a dialectic that seeks eventual re-unification. The question that remains, however, is what are we to make of these competing accounts of the other as wholly other, and yet also as always encroaching upon the self (a problem that is structurally isomorphic with the aporia that *The Gift of Death* discerns between being responsible to an individual who is wholly other, and the ethical responsibility required for all humanity)?

In regard to a resolution of this problematic, it is worth recognising that Derrida consistently asserts that it is the privilege granted to unity, to totality, and even to community as an organised whole, that is dangerous for the other, as well as for responsibility, the decision, and ethics[273]. This is not to deny that unity and gathering are indispensable to the human condition. However, Derrida maintains that it is what disrupts this totality, rather than what preserves this totality, which is the condition of relating to the other. This reaffirms that responsibility consists more in the recognition of that which disrupts the totality, rather than that which unifies the totality.

Regarding this privilege that he accords to disruption and disassociation, Derrida goes on to elaborate:

> Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not disassociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the *radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other*... disassociation is not an obstacle to society but the condition... I can address the other only to the extent that there is a separation, a disassociation, so that I cannot replace the other and vice versa [*my italics*][274].

One question worth asking in response to this, is whether Derrida's final suggestion that one can only address the other if there is a separation or disassociation – which depending upon the way this disassociation is characterised, this thesis does not want to contest – necessarily also affirms the radical singularity of the other. This is not a *fait accompli* or some irrefutable logical deduction, and an alternative response to this type of problematic is that presented by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

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[272]Caputo, J., *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p 54.
[273]Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 13.

As has been explored in greater detail in earlier chapters, Merleau-Ponty also posits a constitutive disassociation that he terms a divergence (*écart*). To recapitulate, the divergence that Merleau-Ponty discerns between the sentient and the sensible is not such that it can ever allow us to access solely the sentient or the sensible paradigm. Our embodied existence precludes us ever managing to simply touch someone without also feeling touched. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty also argues that a similar chiasmic logic applies to the domain of alterity, and he defines self and other as "the obverse and reverse of each other" (VI 83, 160). According to Merleau-Ponty's position, there is a divergence or disassociation between self and other, but they are also chiasmically intertwined with one another in such a way that to speak of the radical singularity of the self, or the radical otherness of the other, is to ignore the fact that both paradigms are conceivable only on account of partaking in the one flesh (VI 248–51).

Merleau-Ponty's position does not require, and arguably even condemns, an affirmation of the radical singularity of the other. His notion of this divergence 'deconstructs' the dictum that the self is not other, because the self is revealed as other than itself, in that a non-dualistic divergence between the sentient and the sensible is conceived of as being that which makes subjectivity possible at all. As is the case for Derrida, Merleau-Ponty hence emphasises that we can address the other only on account of this separation. However, the important point to ascertain from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that responsibility to the other requires a recognition of the overlappings, intertwinings, and encroachments that typify any relation between self and other, and also problematise the very ease of this distinction (VI 123). This is not to encourage a domesticated conception of alterity, which Gasché has rightly criticised[275], but it is a recognition of the empirical status of the other for us – that is, as someone or something at least partially known, and to some degree always encroaching upon us in a way that problematises any conception of a radically singular confrontation with the wholly other. If we are always already intertwined with the other, then responsibility to the alterity of the other consists precisely in not respecting an "absolute singularity" that downplays our inherence in a shared world.

Let me present this alternative in a slightly different way. Merleau-Ponty's

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[274]Derrida, J., as cited in Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 14.
[275]Gasché, R., as cited in Critchley, S., *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p 29.

position has been aptly characterised as suggesting that the other's difference inspires an attempt at communion (not union)[276]. In other words, responsibility to the other's difference (alterity) demands the transformation and intertwining of these notions of self and other, such that we can affirm what he terms our "natal bond" (VI 136) and "deepen our inherence in Being" (S 123). The implication of this is that alterity is best encountered in an interaction between two or more people in which the lives of both participants are irretrievably altered, and in which this transformative interaction between self and other is deepened rather than resisted (PW 142–3). While Derrida acknowledges that such an intertwining exists, he emphasises that responsibility involves respecting the radical singularity of the other and the qualities of their alterity that resist this encroachment of self upon other, and this is an important difference between him and Merleau-Ponty.

Indeed, it would seem that as well as a methodological agnosticism (ie. a refusal to propound a single thesis), Derrida's later philosophy also exhibits an agnosticism in regard to the other. He repeatedly demands that one must, above all, respect the otherness of the other – that being their messianic qualities and their radical singularity. For Derrida, genuine responsibility towards the other's radical singularity necessitates that that alterity must not be imbued with any determinate characteristics. To put the problem somewhat crudely, the idea motivating such a claim is that the radical singularity of the other cannot be accessed, for even if it could be, that which was accessed would no longer be radically singular. Derrida implies that the answer to this problem is to refuse to limit that alterity to any determinate shape or form (a refusal to decide) and to be open to the aspects of that alterity which might yet come (the messianic). In his own passion for certitude, Derrida will not say more than is true, and not being able to find any *a priori* form of responsibility to the other, he makes a religion of the other's elusiveness (it is called deconstruction) and a religion of agnosticism. Whatever the other qualities of this religion, such an understanding threatens to fetishise responsibility towards the other as simply the prioritising of that which resists transformative encroachment with the self. As well as omitting from consideration some alternative and compelling explanations of what a responsible appreciation of alterity might consist in (eg. Merleau-Ponty's), such an account also downplays the significance of Derrida's own critique of Lévinas in

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[276]This particular turn of phrase is indebted to Rosalyn Diprose and more specifically to her paper, "Here I Am by the Grace of the Other and Politics Is in Disgrace", as it was given at the Australian Society for

"Violence and Metaphysics". Derrida's more recent exaltation of themes like the messianic and the wholly other seeks to reverse the traditional hierarchical opposition between self and other, but it often does so without due recognition of phenomenological considerations, including the inevitability of a certain 'imperialism' of the self/same.

Continental Philosophy Conference, University of New South Wales, November 2000.

10. Possible and Impossible, Self and Other, and the Reversibility of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida

Drawing together the various themes that have concerned this comparative juxtaposition of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida is a task of no small order, particularly without superficially privileging the one philosopher at the expense of the other. Of course, a conclusion inevitably necessitates some degree of subjugation, in that it must foreclose on certain alternative possibilities, and in this respect it will continue to be argued that the Derridean account of alterity too often downplays the importance of the more relational and chiasmic conception of alterity that Merleau-Ponty theorises. This has already been partially illustrated, but this final chapter will reaffirm this in regard to Derrida's recent preoccupation with what has come to be termed "possible-impossible" aporias – that is, with themes in which the condition of their possibility is also, and at once, the condition of their impossibility. In order to reveal the shared logic upon which these aporias rely, and also to raise some questions about their persuasive efficacy, Derrida's paradoxical discussions of giving, forgiving, hospitality, and mourning will be considered. Moreover, it will be argued that of the two polarities evoked by each of his possible-impossible aporias, one term of the opposition almost invariably posits a separation between two "radical singularities", or in somewhat more controversial terms, between a self and an other. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty's abiding emphasis upon the chiasmic intertwining of self and other provides the resources to challenge the aporetic oscillation between possible and impossible that Derrida rather frequently delineates.

Moreover, it will be highlighted that Derrida's methodology again equivocates between two main alternatives: he either remains within a possible-impossible aporia (and hence implies that there is no way of escaping the paradox in which all giving is also always a taking); or he becomes prophetic in the face of this aporia and hence tacitly privileges a rather absolute conception of an alterity (*tout autre*) that might yet come and disrupt this type of calculative exchange. It will be argued that Merleau-Ponty would accuse the latter tendency of being tantamount to what he refers to as an "agnosticism in regard to the other" (VI 79), and his philosophy also has some correlative implications regarding the problem of respecting the alterity of the other, which has been an enduring concern of deconstruction and motivates Derrida's particular focus upon possible-impossible aporias. Despite the fact that two of Derrida's recent texts have

sympathetically engaged with the work of Merleau-Ponty – *Memoirs of the Blind*, and *Le Toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy* – there remain some important differences between these theorists that are worth examining. Firstly, however, a sustained exegesis of Derrida's possible-impossible aporias is required.

The gift:

The aporia that surrounds the notion of the gift revolves around the paradoxical thought that a genuine gift cannot actually be understood to be a gift. In his text, *Given Time*, Derrida suggests that the notion of the gift contains an implicit demand that the genuine gift must somehow reside outside of the oppositional demands of giving and taking, and beyond any mere self-interest or calculative reasoning (GT 30). According to him, however, a gift is also something that cannot appear as such (GD 29), as it is destroyed by anything that proposes equivalence or recompense, as well as by anything that even proposes to know of, or acknowledge it. This may sound somewhat counter-intuitive, but even a simple 'thank-you' for instance, which both acknowledges the presence of a gift and also proposes some form of equivalence with that gift, can be seen to annul the gift (cf. MDM 149). By politely responding with a 'thank-you', there is often, and perhaps even always, a tacit presumption that because of this acknowledgement one is no longer indebted to the other who has given, and that nothing more can be expected of an individual who has so responded. Significantly, the gift is hence drawn into the cycle of giving and taking, where a good deed must be accompanied by a suitably just response. As the gift is associated with a command to respond, it becomes an imposition for the receiver, and it even becomes an opportunity to take for the 'giver', who might give precisely in order to receive the acknowledgement from the other that they have in fact given. There are undoubtedly many other examples of how the 'gift' can be deployed, and not necessarily deliberately, to gain advantage. Of course, it might be objected that even if it is psychologically difficult to give without also receiving (and in a manner that is tantamount to taking) this does not in-itself constitute a refutation of the logic of genuine giving. According to Derrida, however, his discussion does not amount merely to an empirical or psychological claim about the difficulty of transcending an immature and egocentric conception of giving. On the contrary, he wants to problematise the very possibility of a giving that can be unequivocally disassociated from receiving and taking.

The important point to ascertain is that, for Derrida, a genuine gift requires an anonymity of the giver such that there is no accrued benefit in giving. The giver cannot even recognise that they are giving, for that would be to reabsorb their gift to the other as some kind of testimony to the worth of the self – ie. the kind of self-congratulatory logic that rhetorically poses the question "how wonderful I am to give this person that which they have always desired, and without even letting them know that I am responsible?". This is an extreme example, but Derrida claims that such a predicament afflicts all giving in more or less obvious ways. While this point will eventually be disputed, for Derrida, the logic of a genuine gift actually requires that self and other be radically disparate, and have no obligations or claims upon each other of any kind. He argues that a genuine gift must involve neither an apprehension of a good deed done, nor the recognition by the other party that they have received[277], and this *seems* to render the actuality of any gift an impossibility[278]. Significantly, however, according to Derrida, the existential force of this demand for an absolute altruism can never be assuaged, and yet equally clearly it can also never be fulfilled, and this ensures that the condition of the possibility of the gift is inextricably associated with its impossibility.

In all of Derrida's diverse ruminations there is no easy solution to this type of problem, and no hint of a dialectic that might unify the apparent incommensurability in which possibility implies impossibility and vice versa. At the same time, however, he does not intend simply to vacillate in hyperbolic and self-referential paradoxes, as he has been accused of by some philosophers[279]. As will become apparent towards the end of this chapter, Derrida also intermittently calls for the breaching of this possible-impossible dilemma and often through an exaltation of that which is wholly other (*tout autre*). The wholly other is envisaged as a heterogeneity that might disrupt this type of aporetic economy, and that might, potentially at least, allow one to avoid the more calculative systems of exchange in which giving inevitably becomes a taking, and the analogous way in which our most well-intentioned conceptions of hospitality have a tendency to render

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[277]Derrida, J., as cited in Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 18–9, cf. p 144.
[278]For Derrida, it is undecidable whether the notion of the gift is a possible or an impossible ideal, as it is inordinately difficult to justify any suggestion that a gift beyond the economy of exchange (ie. calculative giving and taking) exists. How could anybody conceive of a giver who had forgotten their own act of giving in the act itself, and hence forgotten and abandoned their own irremediable individuality? And yet it cannot be said, *a priori*, that the gift does not exist. From what Archimedean perspective could one sceptically repudiate altruism?
[279]McCarthy, T., "The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism" in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XXI, Numbers 1 & 2, Fall–Winter 1989–90, p 146.

"other others" as strangers and refugees (cf. OH 135, GD 68). Of course, the *tout autre* might also make things worse, and it certainly cannot be imbued with any determinate positive content, but it is important to recognise that there is a paradoxical sense in which deconstruction actually seeks genuine giving, hospitality, forgiving and mourning, even where it acknowledges that these concepts are forever elusive and can never actually be fulfilled.

How Derrida can accomplish these different and perhaps even mutually exclusive intentions will be an enduring concern of this chapter. Indeed, it remains to be seen exactly how we can open ourselves to a gift that is beyond the systems of opposition that Derrida argues are intent on reinscribing it back into their calculative logic. According to John Caputo, the impasse that afflicts the notion of the gift is "not conceptually resolved by a bit of intellectual adroitness, but strained against performatively, by an act of generosity, by a giving which gives beyond itself, which is a little blind and does not see where it is going"[280]. Deconstruction, according to this interpretation, is hence envisaged as encouraging the possibility of something more fruitful than the oppositional logic that it so persuasively delineates, but what does Caputo's "giving that gives beyond itself" really mean, and what could a "giving that gives beyond itself" entail, if the gift is never present? Such questions will be indirectly returned to, but for the moment an alternative interpretation is also worth considering.

Unlike Caputo, Cathryn Vasseleu argues that "the impossibility of the gift, is the impossibility of a difference beyond oppositional significance"[281]. According to her position, a genuine gift really is rendered impossible by Derrida, and we hence cannot escape the economy of exchange. However, if this were entirely true, then there would also be no strategy that could even shuffle just a little bit away from metaphysics and deconstruction's various interventions would hence be largely meaningless. Moreover, if difference can only ever be encountered through a system of possible-impossible aporias, then it seems that a human other could never be encountered without presupposing an oppositional relation – perhaps one not unlike the master-slave role-playing that Sartre, borrowing from Hegel, famously describes in *Being and Nothingness*. It is worth recalling that Sartre argues that our relations with others – love, hate, indifference, sadism, and masochism, etc. – are all impossible projects and yet they are nevertheless

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[280]Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 112.
[281]Vasseleu, C., *Textures of Light*, p 63.

envisaged as existential necessities. We are compelled into seeking variations on these attitudes towards the other, but none of them can be satisfactory. Unable to reconcile this fundamental paradox, Sartre concludes that humanity is a useless passion[282], and an important question for this chapter will be whether deconstruction also necessitates that any relation with the other must be afflicted by a similar type of paradoxical logic in which possibility is inextricably associated with impossibility. Is a "giving that gives beyond itself" ultimately possible or impossible, if we can momentarily resist the logic of Derrida's work that seeks to collide these two notions? According to Derrida, even if there is no absolute altruism, there are degrees and economies of narcissism (P 199), and this chapter will examine deconstruction's claim to minimise this narcissistic element.

Hospitality:

In order to begin to answer the questions just posed, it is also worth considering the aporia that Derrida associates with hospitality. The notion of hospitality explicitly opens itself to themes that have concerned us throughout this thesis, including the problem of respecting the alterity of the other. According to Derrida, genuine hospitality before any number of unknown others is not, strictly speaking, a possible scenario (OH 135, GD 70, AEL 50, OCF 16). If we contemplate giving up everything that we seek to possess and call our own, then most of us can empathise with just how difficult enacting any absolute hospitality would be. Despite this, however, Derrida simultaneously insists that the whole idea of hospitality depends upon such an altruistic concept and is inconceivable without it (OCF 22). In fact, he argues that it is this internal tension and aporia that keeps the concept alive. He makes no attempt to defuse the paradoxical nature of such suggestions. On the contrary, his interest is drawn towards the notion of hospitality because the word carries its opposite within itself: it derives from 'hostis', which originally meant stranger, but has now come to mean hostile[283].

The significance of Derrida's point is not restricted only to the etymological domain, however. For him, the concept of hospitality is itself involved in an aporia, in that it inevitably makes claims to property. Because it partakes in the desire to establish a form of self-identity, any attempt to behave hospitably is also always partly betrothed to

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[282]Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness*, p 258–70.
[283]Derrida, J., "Hostipitality" in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 5, Number 3, Issue

the closing of boundaries, and to the exclusion of particular groups or ethnicities, and often to nationalism (OH 151–5). Whether one invokes the current Australian insistence upon border control (ie. its territorial waters that cannot be traversed), or simply the ubiquitous suburban fence and alarm system, it seems that hospitality always posits some kind of limit upon where the other can trespass, and hence has a tendency to be rather inhospitable.

For Derrida, there is also a more existential example of this tension, in that the notion of hospitality requires one to be the 'master' of the house, country or nation (and hence controlling). On the other hand, it simultaneously demands a certain welcoming of whomever may be in need of that hospitality, and it hence involves a relinquishing of judgement and control in regard to who will receive that hospitality. Caputo expands upon this suggestion to make an interesting and significant point. According to him, the person capable of being hospitable:

> Is someone who has the power to host someone so that neither the alterity of the stranger, nor the power of the host, is annulled by this hospitality. There is an essential self-limitation built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one's own and the stranger[284].

In treating a guest hospitably, the host is forced to negotiate a delicate balance between respecting the alterity of their guest and not relinquishing their own power. Moreover, accomplishing this relies upon establishing an important difference between the two parties and a relatively clear demarcation of the boundaries between self and other. It also implies that hospitality to the other, or to the foreigner, consists in retaining and even valorising this difference between them and 'me'. There are some problems associated with such a position, and for the moment it suffices to point out that it risks legitimising an attitude of "benevolent humility towards an other that is not me"[285], particularly if the other is the prioritised term of this disjunction. It will be argued that this is an ontologically problematic and ethico-politically dangerous way of conceiving of our relation with alterity. It is also a position that deconstruction sometimes inclines towards,

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Dec 2000, p 3–4. Also see Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 110.

[284]Caputo, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p 110.

[285]This is a phrase Vicki Kirby uses to encapsulate a certain interpretation of Derrida that she associates with Drucilla Cornell, among other theorists. However, Kirby rather vehemently disagrees with this interpretation of Derrida that makes alterity forever elusive and a "difference that is so foreign to me that it cannot be known". While Kirby is right to be wary of this tendency on the grounds that it prohibits a genuinely ethical relation to the other, I think that Derrida equivocates on this issue rather more often than

although this applies more to secondary proponents of deconstruction than to the work of Derrida himself.

Indeed, there is a sense in which any self-other opposition at least appears to be broken down by the notion of hospitality. As well as involving claims to mastery and ownership of the house, hospitality also requires that one be graciously open to the other, disavowing all judgement, and it could be argued that this openness to alterity without discrimination is precisely that which eludes the oppositional logic of self and other. This is true in one sense, but it is also important to recognise that for this openness to alterity to count as hospitality, it must nevertheless involve two radically disparate singularities. According to Derrida, it is not hospitality when commerce enters into the equation and either party becomes aware of the ways in which they are indebted to the other. On the contrary, genuine hospitality must retain a disjunction between a self (or a radical singularity in Derrida's terminology) and someone that is wholly other, such that neither the alterity of the host, nor the visitor, can be annulled. The question that remains is: in what does that alterity consist, and how could it be annulled? What is this alterity that should be so preserved, as if sacrosanct? If we must be responsible to the inaccessible part of an other that should remain somehow pure and untainted, then this would appear to be simply the reverse of the traditional philosophical exaltation of an interior mental reserve (ie. subjectivity). Were Derrida maintaining such a line of thought, he would still be succumbing to the metaphysical temptation of privileging purity and simplicity at the expense of what is complicated and contingent (cf. M 195, LI 130).

Of course, it is difficult to assert that Derrida is making such a mistake. He is not unaware that conceiving of self and other in such a clearly distinct manner artificially posits a unity to the self that is not only misleading, but also potentially inhibiting in regard to our experience of and for the other. Indeed, this is precisely what his notion of *différance* sought to guard against, and it is also what his criticisms of the Husserlian 'now' moment sought to preclude (cf. SP 154). However, despite his earlier philosophy's insistence that the other is always entangled with the self/same, it will be argued that many of Derrida's more recent texts on aporia actually presuppose a disjunction between self and other that denies the ways in which such differences are always partially breached. This is not to allege that Derrida is a simple dualist, as other theorists have

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she allows. See Kirby, V., *Telling Flesh*, p 99.

alleged[286], since whenever he insists upon a radical disjunction between self and other in one term of his aporia, this is usually accompanied by the converse in the other term of his aporia. That said, his account nevertheless presumes that such dualisms are an important and constitutive factor in the various concepts that he considers. This, however, is something that Merleau-Ponty would deny, and not only on ontological grounds, as will soon become clear. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be envisaged to challenge Derrida's descriptions of the possible-impossible aporia, and in introducing two more aporias with which Derrida is concerned (forgiving and mourning), this chapter will begin to suggest how this less oppositional conception of the aporia may be conceived.

Forgiveness:

Derrida discerns another aporia in regard to whether or not to forgive somebody who has caused us significant suffering or pain. This particular paradox revolves around the premise that if one forgives something that is actually forgivable, then one simply engages in calculative reasoning and hence does not really forgive. Most commonly in interviews, but also in his recent text *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Derrida argues that according to its own internal logic, genuine forgiving must involve the impossible: that is, the forgiving of an 'unforgivable' transgression – eg. a 'mortal sin' (OCF 32, cf. OH 39). Like the decision itself (cf. PF 69), there is hence a sense in which forgiving must be 'mad' and 'unconscious' (OCF 39, 49), and it must also remain heterogenous to political and juridical rationality. This unconditional 'forgiveness' explicitly precludes the necessity of an apology or repentance by the guilty party, although Derrida also acknowledges that this pure notion of forgiveness must always exist in tension with a more conditional forgiveness where apologies are actually demanded. However, he argues that this conditional forgiveness amounts more to amnesty and reconciliation than to genuine forgiveness (OCF 51). The pattern of this discussion is undoubtedly beginning to become familiar and Derrida's various discussions of forgiving are orientated around revealing a fundamental and unavoidable paradox that ensures that forgiving can never be finished or concluded – it must always be open, like a permanent rupture, or a wound that refuses to heal.

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[286]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 3. Moreover, in their respective essays in *Écart and Différance*, Patrick Burke and Leonard Lawlor also maintain that Derrida introduces a new binary

However, this paradox that Derrida discerns in relation to forgiveness also depends, in one of its dual aspects, upon a disjunction between self and other. Derrida argues that "forgiveness must engage *two singularities*: the guilty and the victim. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of forgiveness in the strict sense" (*my italics*, OCF 42). Given that he also acknowledges that it is difficult to conceive of any such face-to-face encounter without a third party – as language itself must serve such a mediating function (OCF 48) – forgiveness is caught in an aporia that ensures that its empirical actuality looks to be a decidedly unlikely occurrence. To recapitulate, the reason that Derrida's notion of forgiveness is caught in such an inextricable paradox is because absolute forgiveness requires a radically singular confrontation between self and other, while conditional forgiveness requires the breaching of categories such as self and other, either by a mediating party, or simply by the recognition of the ways in which we are always already intertwined with the other (eg. Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic conception of self and other). Indeed, Derrida explicitly argues that when we know anything of the other, or even understand their motivation in however minimal a way, this absolute forgiveness can no longer take place (OCF 49). Derrida can offer no resolution in regard to the impasse that obtains between these two notions, except that a hyperbolic oscillation between them is necessary for responsibility (OCF 51). But this hyperbolic oscillation between the two terms presumes that both of these demands are equally insistent. However, even if we accept some type of originary disjunction (cf. to Merleau-Ponty's *écart*), this aporia is diminished if we accord an ontological priority to either horn of this dilemma.

For example, while Merleau-Ponty also insists upon a divergence that obtains between touching and being touched (VI 148), self and other (VI 83, 160), he nevertheless argues that it is not simply a hyperbolic oscillation that obtains between these respective polarities. There is also an overlapping and encroachment, such that the experience of being touched is always betrothed to the experience of touching, and vice versa (VI 123). When one hand touches the other, there is never a situation where touching is radically opposed to being touched. Rather, there is always an ambiguity, and Merleau-Ponty hence argues that to speak of touching as if it could be disassociated from being touched, is to represent the phenomenon falsely (PP 93).

This might not seem immediately related to Derrida's various discussions of the

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opposition (p 63), and a dualism that severs the linguistic from the perceptual (p 72).

possible-impossible aporia, but as has been consistently illustrated throughout this thesis, Merleau-Ponty also propounds a similar argument regarding the relationship between self and other. Rather than self and other being radically opposed, there is a difference between them, but not a dualistic difference, and not even a hyperbolic oscillation between them (Sartre's master-slave dialectic stages just such an oscillation). According to Merleau-Ponty:

> The self and the non-self are like the obverse and the reverse, and since our own experience is this turning around that installs us far indeed from ourselves, in the other, in the things... by a sort of chiasm, we become the others and we become the world (VI 160).

Merleau-Ponty's intention in this rather enigmatic passage is not to deny alterity, or to propound an "imperialism of the same" that ignores difference. His chiasmic ontology endorses an encroachment between self and other, but it will not admit of a fusion (VI 123), and his point is that an ambiguous intertwining between self and other obtains precisely because "the gaze of the other reveals an alterity that is already articulated in my own visibility"[287]. There is a symmetry between the problem of our embodiment in the world – typified as it is by a divergence between the sentient and the sensible that makes any conception of subjectivity possible at all – and the problem of the other. The other is inconceivable without this divergence that is already within the self, and this divergence between the sentient and the sensible is also inconceivable without the alterity of the other. These problems encroach upon each other – and this is what Claude Lefort fails to appreciate[288] – to such an extent that as James Hatley argues:

> Because the self of each particular chiasmic body is already articulated as a multi-dimensional differentiation of itself with itself, the encounter with the other becomes inextricably intertwined with one's encounter with one's self[289].

Hatley's position represents Merleau-Ponty well, and there can be no encounter with the other as absolutely other, but only with the other as they impact upon and transform the alterity and divergence that are already involved in our own embodiment. There is a

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[287]Hatley, J., "Recursive Incarnation and Chiasmic Flesh: Two Readings of Paul Celan's 'Chymisch'" in *Chiasms*, eds. Evans & Lawlor, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p 237.

[288]As has been argued in chapter eight, Lefort's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are misplaced because he argues that Merleau-Ponty accords a foundational priority to the body's relationship to itself, which is then superimposed upon the problem of others (See Lefort, C., "Flesh and Otherness", p 3–13). However, Merleau-Ponty's point is precisely that the sentient-sensible relationship is inconceivable without the alterity of the other, and that these two aspects of alterity mutually encroach upon one another.

genuine interdependency between these two issues for Merleau-Ponty, and self and other are hence intertwined on several different levels. Now, Derrida has frequently said similar things regarding the encroachment that applies between what we think of as 'self' and 'other' (as well as 'inside' and 'outside'), especially in his earlier work (cf. WD 126)[290]. Nevertheless, it remains the case that his possible-impossible aporias retain their aporetic nature only if we acquiesce to this disjunction between self and other (or at least between two radical singularities), neither of which Merleau-Ponty would countenance.

If this is not already apparent, despite insisting that an oscillation between an absolute and a more conditional notion of forgiveness is necessary for responsibility, Derrida's concrete discontent with the current French and international discussions about forgiveness – in relation to the Algerian oppression, for example – clearly revolves around forgiveness being deprived of what he describes as its absolute, "mad" and extraordinary aspect (OCF 39). In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* at least, Derrida exhibits a nostalgia for a notion of forgiveness that is indebted to a radically disjoined conception of self and other that can admit of no mediation (for that would simply be amnesty and reconciliation). Of course, he also concludes this text by suggesting that while he retains this rather absolute conception of forgiveness, he intends to do so without the notion of sovereignty that is commonly involved in it (OCF 59). Unfortunately, however, sovereignty seems to be a rather necessary consequence of his forgiveness aporia, which emphasises that a disjunction between "two singularities" is necessary for genuine forgiveness to take place (OCF 42).

Now, there are at least two Merleau-Ponty inspired responses to this predicament. The first has already been partially explicated, and that would be to deny outright that this strange negotiation between radical singularities is a major and important factor in the various concepts that Derrida considers. If self and other are necessarily intertwined together, then the argument from Merleau-Ponty, to bring him artificially into the problem of forgiveness, would be that forgiveness is always conditional (ie. amnesty and reconciliation) and that there is no reason to presume that we are actually motivated by a desire to forgive in the absolute and pure way that Derrida wants us to. This would

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[289]Hatley, J., p 238.

[290]Moreover, Derrida's notion of *différance* also arguably entails a quite closely related position, even if it is not, strictly speaking, within the purview of phenomenology. For a collection of essays that explores the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's notion of *écart* and Derridean *différance*, see *Écart and Différance: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*.

simply be "high-altitude thinking" that is not grounded in the chiasmic intertwining that Merleau-Ponty argues is the ultimate truth (VI 69).

And it does seem that Derrida's paradoxical insistence that genuine forgiving must involve forgiving the 'unforgivable', is ameliorated by this fact that it is never simply a self-contained 'I' that must forgive an act of another who is wholly other, radically disjoined. For Merleau-Ponty, this is ontologically the case, but it is also more empirically true. Habitual associations, or just associations *per se*, make self and other related and somehow even conjoined (eg. family and friends), and the whole aporia of which Derrida speaks is hence rendered capable of change. After all, the 'unforgivable' has almost always been contributed to by both parties, and forgiving is rather difficult to accomplish alone. These axiomatic observations are not the main focus of Derrida's work, but they do suggest that the compulsion of the paradox that he presents depends upon a notion of forgiveness that consistently invokes a radical singularity that admits of no mediation. He mentions this radical singularity in many of his more recent texts (PF 37, GD 60), and it seems that there is a latent individualism in Derrida's work that Merleau-Ponty does not have[291].

For Merleau-Ponty, there can be no confrontation between two radical singularities; on the contrary, the dehiscence of the tangible-touching is the condition of subjectivity and also ensures that the other is always presupposed by and intertwined within the self, albeit in an immensely complicated manner. As Cornelius Castoriadis has pointed out, this almost renders the individual unthinkable[292], and while this might be understood as a criticism of Merleau-Ponty's work, there is also a sense in which it is an accurate account of the complexities of the life-world.

The second response to Derrida's possible-impossible aporias which is also indebted to the work of Merleau-Ponty, is to emphasise the way in which our embodied situation itself inclines us towards forgiving, and towards the dissolution of the aporia. Even if both polarities of the Derridean aporia could be said to be prescient and defining features of the various concepts that he considers (and I think this can be disputed),

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[291]Derrida's references to singularity are not precisely the same as advocating individuality, but his persistent juxtaposition of terms like radical singularity and wholly other cannot but engender individualistic overtones.

[292]Castoriadis, C., "Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition" in *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 36, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993, p 18. Despite the fact that Castoriadis argues that Merleau-Ponty's work avoids many of the faults that have befallen post-structuralist thought since, he expresses some reservations regarding what he suggests is Merleau-Ponty's tendency to make individuality

according to a common-sense conception of things, it would nevertheless seem that many of us do eventually give, forgive, mourn, etc. One explanation of this might be that a past misdeed by those close to us, for example, is gradually reabsorbed into the entirety of our situation, and our lives structured around it such as to overcome the problem. As has been illustrated in chapter six, this is something that Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the body-subject's movement towards an equilibrium also implies (PP 153). According to his analysis in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in order to cope with our environment we consistently adjust our behavioural modes in order to minimise confrontations, aporias, and anything that might disrupt our "intentional arc" towards the world (PP 136, 153, 250). Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly suggest this himself, this might also involve excluding anything likely to induce painful recollections.

Derrida and Merleau-Ponty are not necessarily in opposition to each other here. By changing one's behaviour in order to maintain an equilibrium with the environment, or to retain a semblance of sanity given an unforgivable betrayal, one is also testifying to that which has induced that alteration, and it might hence be argued that forgiving has not really taken place, as grievances are still tacitly held. But it is important to recognise that this is not a consciously reflective activity, and the fact that the body excludes things from our particular horizons of significance is not something that should be ignored. Nietzsche has remarked that "without forgetfulness, there can be no happiness, no hope, no present"[293], and Merleau-Ponty describes an embodied habituality that is an abandoning of the "I think" in favour of an "I can" (PP 137); it is a forgetting that is simultaneously a recognition of a way beyond that which has caused the consternation. Our corporeality accommodates us to our situation, it turns a wound into a scar, and it almost forgives and forgets for us. Of course, forgetting and forgiving are not the same thing, but this type of habitual forgetting, which occurs as the body-subject adjusts to its environment over a period of time, is a necessary accompaniment to the possibility of forgiving and it also blurs the boundaries between these two apparently distinct notions.

If the point of this discussion is not yet apparent, there seems to be a way in which the impasse involved in the paradoxical necessity to forgive the unforgivable can be gradually ameliorated through our embodied situation. The structure of Derrida's possible-impossible aporias – in which the terms of an opposition rely upon each other

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unthinkable.

[293]Nietzsche, F., *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Kaufman, Vintage Books, 1969, p

(in that they are considered to be indissociable) but never actually manage to interact (eg. a wound that refuses to heal) – seem to be capable of a recuperation that gradually diminishes the aporia and allows forgiveness to take place. Time, as they say, heals all wounds. Derrida might respond that this claim that our corporeal comportment towards the world inclines us towards forgiving, mourning, etc., is simply equivalent to conditional forgiveness (ie. amnesty) and hence does not refute the more transcendental and absolute notion of forgiveness that inspires it. Perhaps this is so, but what does it mean for the Derridean aporia if it is the case that this conditional forgiveness is inscribed in our embodied temporality? Our embodiment in the world compels us into action, and into moving on, and this situation delimits the range and extent of our experience of the forgiveness aporia. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can hence be envisaged to provide an important supplement to the forgiveness aporia, in that the structure of the possible-impossible opposition can be gradually diminished via the body's increasingly refined adjustment to the particularities of its environment. Of course, this is not a supplement that Derrida would be likely to endorse.

This notion of an embodied comportment cannot be pursued in further depth here (it has been considered in chapter six), but the main point to ascertain from the preceding discussion is that Derrida's forgiveness aporia partially relies upon a conception of self and other that admits of no mediation. Moreover, in prioritising the necessity of preventing the alterity of the other from being annulled, his understanding of hospitality has also been seen to depend upon a rather precise self and other demarcation. Similarly, in the previous chapter it was highlighted that *The Gift of Death* repeatedly insists that responsibility towards the alterity of the other relies upon a conception of "radical singularity" (GD 60, 68, 79, 87), and it is worth recalling that the negotiation between Abraham and God quickly makes all other considerations – including wife, son, and community – superfluous (GD 73). Derrida's later work hence exhibits a surprising tendency to emphasise the separation of self and other, rather than the breaching of these categories. Of course, this is a disputed and contentious claim. According to Kirby, on the contrary:

> The breach in the identity and being of the sovereign subject, and in the very notion of cognition itself, is not merely nostalgic loss, nor anticipated threat or promise. It is a constitutive breaching, a recalling and differentiating within the

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57–8.

> subject that hails it into presence. As impossible as it may seem, the ethical relation to radical alterity is to an other that is, also, me[294].

Kirby's position undoubtedly captures one aspect of the Derridean account, particularly in regard to his early writings, which she focuses upon. However, the important question revolves around how we are to balance her interpretation with the Derrida who frequently espouses a radical singularity, a wholly other, a "relationless relation" (MO 71, GD 72–3), a "waiting without horizon" (MO 67), and partially relies upon a distinct conception of self and other in his possible-impossible aporias. It has already been argued that he more often prioritises a difference between self and other that precludes encroachment (see chapter nine), but it is worth devoting further analysis to another of his possible-impossible aporias, and one in which this type of self-other dualism is more difficult to discern.

Mourning:

In *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, which was written almost immediately following de Man's death in 1983, Derrida reflects upon the political significance of his colleague's apparent Nazi affiliation in his youth, and he also discusses the pain of losing his friend. Given that it is difficult to conceive of the process of grieving without some recognition of the intermingling of self and other that ensures that the death of a loved one is so traumatic, it is not surprising that in this text, Derrida envisages the other as being 'within' the self more consistently and obviously than he does in many of his more recent texts.

Derrida's argument about mourning adheres to a similarly paradoxical logic to that which has been associated with him throughout this chapter. He suggests that the 'successful' mourning of the deceased other actually fails – or at least is an unfaithful fidelity – because the other becomes a part of us, and in this interiorisation their genuine alterity is no longer respected. On the other hand, failure to mourn paradoxically appears to succeed, because the presence of the other in their absolute exteriority is prolonged (MDM 6). As he suggests, there is a sense in which "an aborted interiorisation is at the same time a respect for the other as other" (MDM 35). Hence the possibility of an impossible bereavement, where the only possible way to mourn, is to be unable to do so.

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[294]Kirby, V., *Telling Flesh*, p 95.

If Derrida remained within such a schematic and insisted that this aborted interiorisation was a respect for the other as other, then this would return us to the type of problematic that this chapter has expressed some significant reservations about – that being the threat of deconstruction engendering a passive humility before an other that is elusive. However, even though this is how he initially presents the problem, Derrida also problematises this "success fails, failure succeeds" formulation (MDM 35).

Moreover, in his essay "Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok", Derrida again considers two models of the type of encroachment between self and other that is regularly associated with mourning. Borrowing from post-Freudian theories of mourning, he posits (although later undermines) a difference between introjection, which is love for the other in me, and incorporation, which involves retaining the other as a pocket, or a foreign body within one's own body. For Freud, as well as for the psychologists Abraham and Torok, whose work Derrida considers, successful mourning is primarily about the introjection of the other. The preservation of a discrete and separate other inside the self is considered to be where mourning ceases to be a 'normal' response and instead becomes pathological. Typically, Derrida reverses this hierarchy and order of subordination by highlighting that there is a sense in which the supposedly pathological condition of incorporation is actually more respectful of the other's alterity. After all, incorporation means that one has not totally assimilated or digested the other, as there is still a heterogeneity (EO 57). On the other hand, Abraham and Torok's 'normal' mourning can be accused of interiorising the other to such a degree that they have become assimilated and even cannibalised[295]. Derrida considers this introjection to be an infidelity to the other, although it will be argued that this type of mourning has more to recommend it than he allows. Indeed, it will be shown that Merleau-Ponty's notion of responsibility towards alterity is more 'digestive' and appropriative, and it will also be argued that this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, it is worth recognising that Derrida's account is not so simple as to unreservedly valorise the incorporation of the other, even if he consistently emphasises this paradigm in an effort to refute the canonical interpretation of successful mourning. He also acknowledges that the more the self "keeps the foreign element inside itself, the more it excludes it" (Fors xvii). Refusing to engage with the

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[295]For a more detailed account of this predicament, see Deutscher, P., "Mourning the Other, Cultural Cannibalism, and the Politics of Friendship" in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 10.3,

other, we exclude their foreignness from ourselves and hence prevent any transformative interaction with it. When fetishised in their externality in such a manner, the dead other really is lifeless and it is significant that Derrida describes the death of de Man in terms of the loss of exchange and of the transformational opportunities that he presented (MDM xvi)[296]. Derrida's point hence seems to be that in mourning, the 'otherness of the other' resists both the process of incorporation as well as the process of introjection. The other can neither be preserved as a foreign entity, nor introjected fully within.

While Merleau-Ponty has rarely written specifically on either death or mourning[297], it is worth recalling a predicament that this thesis has previously associated with his general writings on alterity. Like Derrida, Merleau-Ponty is also dissatisfied with two main paradigms of responsibility towards alterity. He is unhappy with the Sartrean account, where the other is forever elusive and/or nothing but a threat (VI 79). In the Sartrean paradigm, we have a Being-for-others, but this is an ontologically separate mode of our existence that is not envisaged to impact upon our Being-for-itself in any sustained way (cf. to incorporation), and this is why Sartre cannot thematise oppression, or a freedom devoid of projects[298]. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty is also unhappy with the idėa of self and other being reduced to each other by the insistence upon contextual horizons (cf. to introjection). They are intertwined together, but not reducible to each other (VI 123). His chiasmic ontology intends to avoid this 'either-or' alternative – eg. *either* conceiving of alterity as so far beyond the comprehension of the subject that it cannot be digested (cf. to 'pathological' mourning), *or* as being domesticated by the subject (cf. to 'normal' mourning) – and this seems to be closely related to the incorporation/introjection problem that Derrida has delineated and then sought to avoid. Does this mean that Derrida tacitly presupposes a chiasmic ontology that is closely related to a thinker that he has rarely written about until recent times? While both philosophers reject similar paradigms, their solutions to the problem of alterity are nevertheless importantly different.

Indeed, neither model of reducing the other to the self via mourning can be

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1998, p 166.

[296]This is a persistent theme of Derrida's eulogies in regard to his colleagues. See his collection of essays entitled *The Work of Mourning*, and in particular his evocative essay on Deleuze.

[297]Merleau-Ponty's personal life was shaped by both death and mourning, however. As well as the perpetual absence of his father, who died in World War I, according to Sartre, the death of Merleau-Ponty's mother in the 1950s induced depression in him for a very long period of time. Sartre even goes so far as to suggest that Merleau-Ponty was himself "born to die" (see Sartre, J, P., *Situations*, p 246), and in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty also briefly claims that we live in an atmosphere of death in general (PP 364).

successful for Derrida, and he instead emphasises that the other must always resist my memory and interiorisation of them. The other is neither introjected within, nor incorporated within, but instead remains outside the grasp of subjectivity – that is, wholly other (*tout autre*). Towards the end of *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, Derrida suggests that responsibility towards alterity is precisely about respecting and even emphasising this resistance of the other (MDM 160, 238), and it is on this point that he parts company with Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty regularly implies that responsibility towards alterity is precisely about respecting the ways in which self and other, as well as self and world, are inextricably intertwined together.

It is worth recalling that where Sartre tries to respect alterity by maintaining that the other is that which is forever elusive and can never be known, Merleau-Ponty accuses him of propounding an "agnosticism in regard to the other" (VI 79). What Merleau-Ponty is trying to elucidate via this phrase, is the way in which when Sartre tries to guarantee the alterity of the other, he does so by arguing that there can be no genuine perception of the other, because any attempt to describe alterity inevitably marks the triumph of a "disguised solipsism" (VI 79). Rather than limit alterity to any determinate shape or form, Sartre simply describes the other as a "freedom that transcends my freedom", and Merleau-Ponty's dissatisfaction with this "agnosticism" is equivalent with Vicki Kirby's disenchantment with what she refers to as an attitude of "benevolent humility towards an other that is absolutely elusive". For both Kirby, and Merleau-Ponty, the worst of infringements upon alterity is to privilege it simply as that which is forever elusive. In the end, this engenders an "anonymous, faceless obsession, an other in general" (VI 72) that ignores the importance of the ways in which we are always intertwined with the other – a recognition which is, of course, necessary for the other to challenge or de-centre us at all.

Now, Derrida is no Sartrean, and he would undoubtedly criticise the humanistic tendencies of Sartre's conception of alterity, but as has already been argued, Derrida's later work also downplays the significance of the ways in which self and other are intertwined together. Firstly, Derrida insists upon the importance of two radical singularities to each of his possible-impossible aporias, and secondly, he privileges something wholly other (*tout autre*) that might disrupt this type of self-other, possible-impossible exchange.

Indeed, after emphasising that the other whom we mourn is necessarily caught in

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[298]This conclusion is justified in more depth in chapter seven.

the aporia of introjection and incorporation, Derrida then claims that "there remains to be thought an other undecidability, one no longer bound to the order of calculation between two poles of opposition, but to the incalculable order of a wholly other" (MDM 137). These references to the incalculability of the wholly other are not, of course, isolated comments (cf. GD 83) but are symptomatic of his responses to many of the aporias that he discerns, as well as his intent to legitimise an ethics of the otherness of the other. However, even if the wholly other paradoxically *is*, as Derrida repeatedly insists, this exaltation of that which is wholly other nevertheless reaffirms that responsibility towards alterity should be directed at that which is outside of the self-other dialectic (see chapter nine). For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, responsibility towards alterity is precisely about immersion in the "natal bond" where self and other encroach upon one another (VI 136). This claim has been justified in detail in chapter eight and particularly through recourse to *The Prose of the World*, but Merleau-Ponty's philosophy affirms the transformation of self and other (a mutual devouring, and alterity is construed as that which literally alters), whereas Derrida more actively affirms an ethics of the other's resistance to this transformative dialectic (an aversion to digestion).

There are undoubtedly some significant issues that remain to be addressed in regard to Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity, but his embodied focus provides the resources for a more recuperative account of the aporias that Derrida discerns, and his chiasmic ontology also represents a more relational aspect of alterity that Derrida's later work does not thematise so frequently, or so well. While Derrida argues that genuine forgiveness requires the separation of self and other, before then bemoaning the impossibility of this ever occurring, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is in the transformation and intertwining of categories like self and other that meaning actually resides. Derrida's possible-impossible aporias harbour a nostalgia for a neat demarcation between two radical singularities, but this is not something that Merleau-Ponty would endorse, and it seems that without such a presumption, the paradoxical force of Derrida's aporias is also diminished.

Conclusion:

In an attempt to explain a similar disparity between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, Martin Dillon perceptively observes that in phenomenology "there is an intertwining of

experience and reflection that serves to discipline the other"[299]. Phenomenology has been famously espoused as a return to our *experience* of the things themselves, and Merleau-Ponty's particular contribution to phenomenology – ie. freeing it from its Cartesian/idealist inclinations – affirms the importance of our *embodied and existential experience* of the things themselves. Dillon argues that if this phenomenological disposition is combined with reflection, or a hyper-reflection that is aware of its own necessarily finite point of view and does not aim at an ultimate synthesis (VI 95), then our experience of the other can be explained in terms of the entire situation, rather than by oscillating between idealist and realist perspectives. The 'truth' of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology is hence his "inscription of difference *within* the same"[300] that highlights that alterity is primarily experienced through the chiasmic recognition that you are like me, but you are also other than me. Moreover, Dillon implies that it is precisely because Derrida's work lacks this experiential and embodied element of phenomenology that his conception of the other is "undisciplined" and wild[301].

Of course, this raises all sorts of questions regarding whether alterity should be disciplined, and how, for that matter, alterity could actually be disciplined. At least ostensibly, the desire for a disciplining of alterity appears to be a contradiction in terms. However, in chapter nine it emerged that alterity is inconceivable without *some* "imperialism of the same". The infinitely other would have no criteria upon which to be recognised, and for alterity to be comprehensible as "other than myself" (cf. WD 126), it needs to be relative to certain expectations and partly disciplined by the forestructures of our understanding. In this respect, it has hence been argued that Merleau-Ponty's account is faithful to the manner in which we do encounter alterity; that is, as always partly disciplined by the horizons and contexts that are brought to bear upon a situation, but also as partly beyond those expectations. Merleau-Ponty's enduring emphasis upon embodied subjectivity disciplines alterity, by revealing that any other is always other *than* something else – usually the subject, or the same – but as has been illustrated in chapter eight, this recognition need not necessarily subordinate alterity to an "imperialism of the same" in which subjectivity is the dominant term of an unequal opposition. This is because, for Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is itself premised upon a gap, or *écart*, and he affirms the reversible transformation of self and other in a manner that breaches the

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[299]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 158.
[300]Vasseleu, C., *Textures of Light*, p 26.

discrete sanctity of these notions. Equally importantly, he consistently implies that responsibility towards alterity involves deepening this transformative interaction.

This is a direction that deconstruction's own treatment of alterity has generally eschewed in favour of emphasising the more asymmetrical aspects of alterity that elude any such transformative dialectic (eg. the messianic, the wholly other, the 'relationless relation', the 'waiting without horizon', etc.). Without deigning to suggest that Merleau-Ponty's position is in-itself wholly satisfactory, it has been argued that a wholly satisfactory account of alterity must draw upon, or be inspired by this embodied focus that he so insistently presents. The reservations that have been expressed throughout this thesis in regard to Derrida's account of alterity, whatever its other inestimable qualities, are all tacitly related to his minimal exploration of this embodied thematic. While there is no reason why this omission should be a necessary component of deconstruction (see chapter three), a more embodied analysis is necessary for a sustained recognition of the ways in which we both conjoin and disjoin with the other, and this is important for several reasons.

To summarise, in chapter six it emerged that Merleau-Ponty's embodied account can thematise varying degrees of undecidability (because habitual behaviour might alter and even recuperate the aporetic framework that Derrida discerns), whereas Derrida's quasi-transcendental position is committed to an absolute conception of the undecidability that precedes and conditions every decision. Merleau-Ponty's capacity to thematise an embodied oppression at the level of decision-making means that there are salient political reasons for wanting to incorporate something of his position (see chapter six). In this final chapter, it has also become apparent that a similar argument applies to many of the other possible-impossible aporias that Derrida discerns. As has been illustrated most clearly in relation to the forgiveness and mourning aporias, it seems that over periods of time our embodied situation can actually alter the structure of the impasse that obtains between the dual terms of a possible-impossible aporia. For example, if our embodied and habitual adjustment towards our environment can induce us to forget, then this also makes forgiving a decidedly more likely occurrence (in fact, it makes the difference between forgetting and forgiving 'undecidable'). This recuperative aspect of our embodied situation is an important supplement to Derrida's own writings on aporia, in that that the structure of the possible-impossible opposition can be gradually

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[301]Dillon, M., *Semiological Reductionism*, p 158.

diminished (or at least altered) via the body's increasingly refined adjustment to the particularities of its environment.

Equally significantly, it has also been established that there are important ethical considerations in favour of Merleau-Ponty's position, most particularly in regard to the consequences that his and Derrida's respective positions have for responsibility. The compulsion to immerse oneself in the chiasmic intertwining, and to recognise the interdependence that we have with both others and the world, is a promising way of characterising our relationship with alterity. This is certainly so in comparison with Derrida's more recent work, which in various different ways downplays the importance of the encroachment of self and other, and in the process verges on legitimising an attitude of benevolent humility before an other that is elusive. More generally, it has been argued that Merleau-Ponty's account of the self and other relationship is the more ontologically and existentially convincing of these two theorists.

Contrary to what Martin Dillon suggests, however, it is not satisfactory to simply rest content with privileging Merleau-Ponty at the expense of Derrida. Dillon's 'Derrida' is just a little too bad[302], and his 'Merleau-Ponty' a little too good, to enable a productive discussion of their differences. What is called for is a philosophy that retains the best insights of both; a deconstruction that rediscovers its phenomenological heritage, admits what it owes to Merleau-Ponty, and can reinvigorate his thoughts with its own[303]. Such a situation promises to be more productive than the dismissive criticisms and the refusal to countenance any sustained textual analysis that is the pervasive attitude of some recent theorists in regard to their French predecessors. Derrida, at least, is increasingly receptive to the work of Merleau-Ponty (see *Memoirs of the Blind*)[304], and this thesis intends to have contributed to the furthering of this dialogue through a recognition of the important and intimate relationship that obtains between the themes of embodiment and alterity.

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[302]Derrida's later philosophy does not merely install another dualism, as Dillon argues, although the recognition of the ways in which self and other encroach upon one another is usually a secondary aspect of his writings on possible-impossible aporias.

[303]While this thesis has not accorded much attention to the weaknesses in Merleau-Ponty's thought that deconstruction can help us to see, such a project obviously remains tenable. For strategic reasons, however (ie. the current dominance of the Derridean account in contemporary European philosophy), it has been more important to argue that an analysis of embodiment need not succumb to the metaphysics of presence, and is actually important for thematising a suitably refined conception of alterity.

[304]Christina Howells argues that Derrida has also recently abandoned his early dislike for Sartre and has become more receptive to some of his ideas. See Howells, C., *Derrida: From Phenomenology to Ethics*, p 135.

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